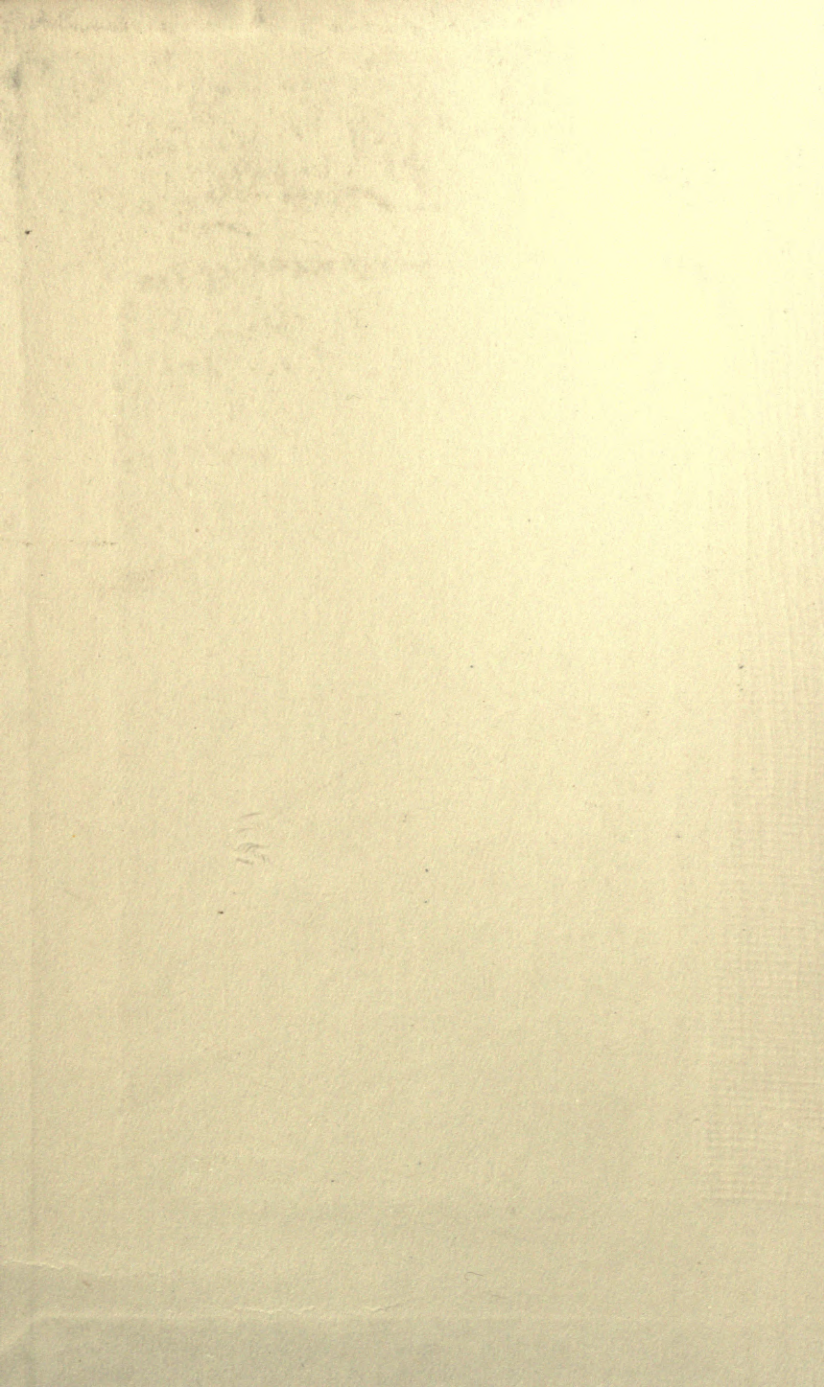


SINLESS



MAUD · H · YARDLEY



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A NOVEL

By

MAUD H. YARDLEY

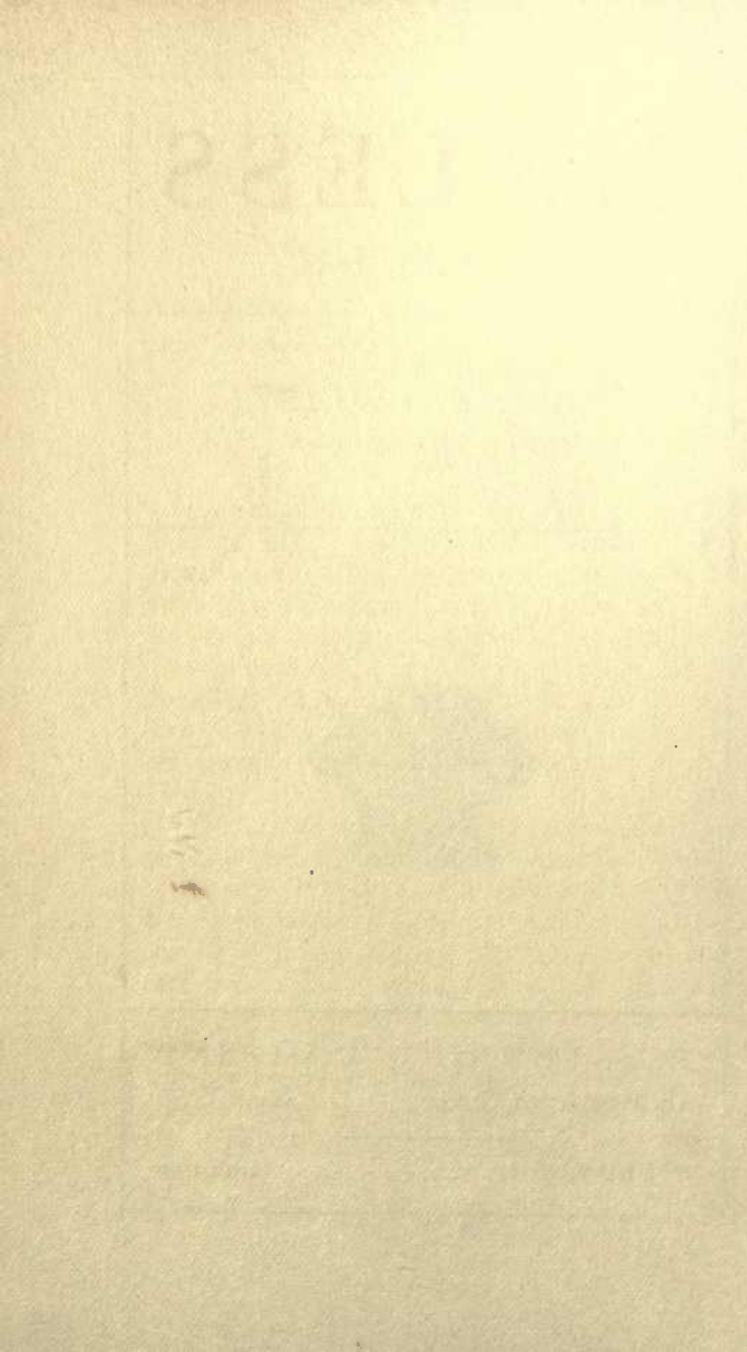
*Author of "The Black Heart
of London," etc.*



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"Oh, Love, what is it in this world of ours
That makes it fatal to be loved?"

BYRON

CHAPTER I

"**E**NGLAND! In a few hours Home! And—
Beauty waiting for us!" The speaker, a young officer, evidently pleased with himself and everybody else, brought his hand down with a friendly if exasperating blow upon the shoulder of a man standing beside him. One could hardly recognise it as a shoulder, or a man, for the figure might well have been a tub, only very slightly animated, and bundled up in a fur coat and innumerable rugs.

But it spoke—and spoke very crossly.

"Don't do that! Hang you, Brandling, you know I detest that sort of horseplay!"

Captain Brandling laughed, and apologised, and threw a handful of papers on to the seat of a compartment he had reserved for himself and two friends; while one of them—the bundled-up tub—settled himself, with much difficulty and more grumbling, in the far corner, and the other stood outside on the platform finishing a cigar and watching his companions with pleasant, amused eyes. He was a very nice-looking man, not strictly handsome, but with that kindliness written plainly on every

SINLESS

feature which lent his face actual beauty. In figure he was rather tall, spare, well-set-up, and broad-shouldered. His hair was quite grey, at the temples almost white, and his eyes, which were very merry, looked bluer than ever set as they were in a face which was deeply bronzed. He waited for the whistle to be blown, and then sprang into the compartment himself.

"Will this beastly train never start?" grumbled the bundle.

"Going now," answered the young captain. "Have a foot-warmer, Forbes? You look cold—don't he, Boyd?"

Boyd struggled with a smile which he did not want Mr Forbes to see. Though they had travelled over from India in the same ship they had seen very little of each other; for Forbes was too utterly selfish and generally disagreeable to make friends easily, and Boyd had never made even the slightest effort to cultivate his acquaintance. Brandling had known him for years, Boyd he had only met on the way home, but both men had been his guests for one night which they spent in Paris, and would be his companions now as far as Charing Cross.

The young captain was the cheeriest of companions—perhaps a trifle too talkative and a little worrying with his perpetual jokes—but the personification of good nature and merriment. As the train steamed onward, gradually increasing speed, he put aside his hat, and stretched his slim young limbs along one side of the carriage.

"I said England suggested Home, and hinted at Beauty," he remarked, "and neither of you replied.

SINLESS

You're both married men—what does home-coming mean to you ? ”

Forbes answered by a prolonged grunt, and rolled himself more comfortably in his rugs. “ Mean ? ” he said, turning a dark, bearded face towards the speaker—“ it means that if this is a specimen of the climate I would rather be anywhere else. It's trying enough over there,” with a slight backward movement of his head, as if India were just across the railway track, “ but one gets used to it in ten years.”

“ Ten years ? ” said Boyd, who had not yet spoken, while the unconscious gleam of half scorn in his eyes gave way to the first touch of interest they had shown at any remark made by Mr Forbes. “ I have been away from England exactly the same length of time.”

“ By Jove ! ” exclaimed Captain Brandling, sitting up, “ have you really ? And not been back at all ? ”

“ Not once. If you are amazed at that, Brandling, you will be still more so when I tell you that I have not seen my wife for all those ten years ! ” Boyd gave this information with a slight smile, but there was just a little restlessness in his voice, the faintest touch of impatience in a slight gesture he made ; and the young captain said “ Great Scott ! ” with more energy than originality. “ Not seen your wife for ten years ! Why, you won't know her.”

“ Shall I not ? ” It was the only answer Boyd made, but there was a world of meaning in it. It told of a tender memory that could never die ; it showed that “ absence ” could indeed make the

SINLESS

"heart grow fonder"; and it caused young Brandling to search the face of the quiet, generally very reticent man gravely, and to tell himself that whoever his wife she was a "thundering lucky woman."

"Nor have I," declared Mr Forbes suddenly. "In the position I have held—and I take it Mr Boyd held one similar—women about one would be distinctly in the way. I represented that to my wife from the hour I went out to India, and I'm happy to say she had the sense to agree with me entirely."

"That was fortunate," said Boyd, with some contempt he could not disguise. "But, personally, I do not agree with you. If a man is to live on one side of the world and his wife on the other they had far better not have married at all."

"Far better!" agreed Forbes, quite amiably for him. "Most people would be better off altogether—unmarried!"

"Why, then, if it is not an impertinent question, did you not bring your wife out, Boyd?" asked Brandling, a little hurriedly, with intent to ward off what might become an uninteresting argument.

"It was part of a bargain her people made with me when I married her. Her mother was in very delicate health, and would not hear of her daughter going far away. She is in equally delicate health still"—with a slightly sarcastic smile—"and my promise to in no way urge my wife to come out to me has held good all this time. You see, when I went out to India I anticipated remaining there at the utmost three years. I am not a believer in long engagements, so we were married before I left."

SINLESS

Boyd spoke a little curtly, not unpleasantly so, but as if desirous of getting quickly away from the subject. It was a sore point with him, this determination, so long continued, on his wife's part to hold him to his promise, to place her mother before her husband. But he never blamed her ; always he blamed her people, always he had found for her excuses.

In his corner, in his bundle of rugs, Forbes was chuckling amusedly. The chuckle brought on a fit of coughing ; but the amusement held good, and he extricated one hand from a fur pocket to wipe his eyes and smooth his short, hard beard.

"I'm laughing at the thought a remark of yours conjured up, Brandling," he volunteered, "about Mr Boyd not recognising his wife. By Jove! I'm quite sure *my* wife will never know me. When I left England"—grinning still—"I was as slim-figured as either of you. I'd no beard, I wasn't bald, and I was altogether a thundering decent-looking chap. Ah! I can see you don't believe it ; but it's true. I put on flesh with an enlarged liver! Time has not been good to me, and I'll bet I'm not a day older than you," nodding towards Boyd.

"Forty!" was the brief reply.

"Forty-four," said Mr Forbes ; and neither of his companions could hide the genuine surprise his information caused.

"I quite envy you!" declared Captain Brandling. "You're both going back to a new life, a new world, as it were. Husbands and wives reunited after ten years! It's a charmingly novel idea."

SINLESS

And Forbes grunted, and Boyd took up a newspaper.

This ended the conversation. In ten minutes Brandling's eyes, large and heavily fringed as a girl's, were closed in sleep. From the far corner Forbes snored loudly ; only Boyd remained awake, alive to the rumble of the train, the shrill whistle of the engine, the dim, dark, indistinct country through which they sped. His thoughts were very far away from his companions—they were with a woman, a woman who was perhaps counting the hours as impatiently as he till they met again, whose last letter had told him that she would meet him upon his arrival in London, that he must look for her by the large bookstall, where she would wait, lest after all these years he had forgotten her. Forgotten ! Boyd read the message again with a tender smile, and, glancing hastily at the two sleepers, held it for a long moment against his lips. Then he pulled out from the right-hand pocket of his waistcoat, a flat gold case attached to his watch-chain, and as he gazed at the pictured face within, his mind travelled back over the long years to a time when he had known but three brief months of perfect happiness—to a time of love, on the memory of which he had had to be content to live so long—to the woman who was his wife and his sweetheart still, and who was, even now, waiting impatiently for his return. It was a very sweet face upon which he looked—very young, and beautifully shaped—the artist had been guilty of no exaggeration of colouring. A severe critic would perhaps have said the lips were a trifle too full, the eyes too close together, the perfect line

SINLESS

from ear to chin absent ; a woman would have looked only once at the picture, and she would have told you instantly and without thought, that the chin, even now, gave indication of doubling itself at an early age, that the eyelids would one day swallow up the lovely eyes, that the cheeks would grow rounded and fuller with the passing years, and that the perfect little uptilted nose would be quite lost between them. But the critic and the woman might have been altogether wrong ; and at anyrate Boyd was neither—he was just a lover, in whose eyes the pictured face was perfect. By-and-by he looked at his watch, found that another half hour should end the journey, and was suddenly shot forward so violently by the stopping of the train that he fell heavily against the sleeping captain, who awoke with a start.

“ Oh ! Are we there ? Eh ? What ? Is it an accident ? ”

“ I don't know. I fancy we've run into something.” Boyd was letting down the window as he spoke, and letting in a great cloud of damp brown mist. He sniffed cautiously, and then shut up the window.

“ Fog,” he said. “ Good old English fog. I have not forgotten the appearance or the smell.”

And Forbes was coming out of his sleep with many grunts and much coughing.

“ Who's opening the window ? Good heavens ! the air's like a wet blanket. What do you say ? It's a fog ? Oh, confound it ! And we shall have to sit here and freeze for hours, I suppose.”

SINLESS

CHAPTER II

IT was indeed a fog—and that which brought the three men to a halt in their journey, which enveloped the line and the stations and the lights in impenetrable, smoky mist, which shut off all sight of the signals, was nothing to compare to the fog which had suddenly fallen upon London. It was one of the very worst of them. As one looked out upon the streets one might easily have believed that one was facing a dead wall. There was nothing to be seen ; even the lights of the lamps, the glare of hotel vestibules, were smothered in thick yellow mist. There was not a sound save that of a cab whistle blown violently at intervals, but apparently with no result.

Down the broad staircase into the hall of the Victoria Hotel a lady came slowly, and even the lights in which she stood penetrated the fog only to the distance of a few inches from her eyes. There were few people about except the servants, and of these, one pulled back the door rather hesitatingly as the lady advanced towards it.

“It’s that bad outside,” he observed respectfully, “that not a vehicle’s going and there’s not a soul about.”

“Thank you. I see it is. But I’m only going to meet the Dover train at Charing Cross. It’s quite simple that little way.”

SINLESS

The porter shrugged his shoulders. He did not think so, but if this dainty, lovely lady chose to brave the fog it was no business of his. He went so far as escorting her to the pavement, as suggesting that she should cross straight in front of the hotel. Then she was lost in dripping, yellow darkness, and he, left to turn back to the square of faint light cut in the fog.

It would seem no difficult task to reach Charing Cross Station from the Victoria Hotel, but on such a night to travel half-a-dozen yards was a serious undertaking. Upon the pavements were horseless cabs; in the roads, drawn close to the kerbs, were carts of all kinds, some horseless too, others with trembling, nervous beasts still hitched to them. Voices could be heard, but from whence they came one could not tell; the scrape of a foot moving cautiously, a muffled cry as someone stumbled, were the only sounds that reached the lady's ears as she groped her way along. Great flaring lights looked no larger than the tip of one's finger; and men and boys with torches, and rough voices that frightened her, seemed to spring from the ground on every side. She heard Big Ben strike the half hour; when she had left the hotel it was not yet the quarter. Added to the unpleasant conviction that at any moment she might step down into some cellar, she came to the conclusion that she was lost. A few jocular gentlemen shouting and laughing knocked up against her, the mist seemed to grow thicker, blacker, and the lady, groping her way to where a faint light shone, caught her breath in a little sob of nervous fear. It was only a street lamp, but to

SINLESS

this she clung desperately, as to a friend ; and on the curious, unaccustomed stillness the quarter hours chimed steadily out. It was absurd—she could not stand here all night—she must ask help of the next passer-by. How foolish she was to disregard the porter's warning, to venture out on such an evening. She was surrounded by hundreds of dwelling-places, in the midst of huge buildings full of living people, and she was as completely lost as though London were the Sahara Desert. A man came along whistling. The lady did not pause to think to what class he might belong, but murmured a desperate and uncertain "I beg your pardon," which arrested him. He struck a match, and looked down into her pretty, frightened face in surprise as instinctively he raised his hat.

"Lost?" he inquired cheerfully. "I don't wonder. Can I help you?"

"I hope you can and will," she returned quickly. "I was never so completely puzzled."

He caught the sound of tears in her voice, and answered hastily: "Don't be afraid. If you will trust me, and tell me where you want to go, I will do my best to help you."

"I want to get to Charing Cross Station."

"Oh! come, that's not bad. You are now somewhere about the Temple. Will you take my arm? We shall not lose each other so, and the roads are very slippery. I have a special knack of finding my way about in fogs," he added cheerfully, and certainly seemed to lead her on with as much ease as if it were broad daylight. "May I ask if you are going to travel to-night?"

SINLESS

"No; I was going to meet my husband, on the train from Dover. I shall be very late."

"Not much more so than the train, I expect." The stranger's words and manner were very comforting; already the lady had lost her fears, and was stepping out quite boldly at his side. They had perforce to make several halts, but at last the station was reached in safety. Upon the platform he gently released her arm.

"How can I thank you enough?" she asked, holding out her hand frankly. "But for you I don't know where I should be now."

"Don't think of it! I hope you will meet your husband safely. Good-night." And he was gone, leaving her in the centre of a station crammed with people whose trains should have borne them away long ago.

She found an official, and made inquiries of him.

"Yes, ma'am. She's in—been in the last quarter hour," alluding to the train mentioned. "Not so late as might be. Was you coming to meet anyone? 'cause the passengers have all gone."

All gone! How ominous the two words sounded. Surely her husband would not be among them! He knew she would meet him; he would make allowance for her being late in such a fog. She pushed through the people, and made her way to one of the barriers, which was scarcely distinguishable. He would guess that she would stand still in one spot, so as to facilitate their meeting, and so she took up her position in the corner, with her back to the bookstall, and where there were the least number of people.

SINLESS

Meanwhile Boyd, who had made half-a-dozen tours of the station in the dim light, addressed one or two ladies and been severely snubbed, was scouring the first-class waiting-rooms. Brandling had left his friends to brave the fog, and Mr Forbes had exhibited considerable useless temper.

"My dear chap, don't be an ass," he had advised, when Boyd had begun his search. "Of course, your wife wouldn't—couldn't—come out on such a night. I know very well mine won't, and I'm not going to look for her. If she'd had any brains she'd have put up at the Station Hotel here—but women never have an idea worth the name. I'm not going to risk being smashed up to go out in a fog like this, and you're an idiot if *you* do!" and had taken himself off to the nearest Spiers & Pond's bar, ordered a hot drink, and settled himself comfortably in the corner by the fire.

But Boyd made still another round. He remembered the message his wife had sent, and he made straight for the bookstall, which was now as deserted as it had been closed in by people a few minutes ago. Very close to it there was not a woman at all. Boyd began to think himself the idiot Mr Forbes had politely called him, when someone in the far corner by the barrier attracted his attention. A woman, who would not have been distinguishable at all but that she was standing directly under a huge light—a woman who was plainly waiting for someone, and who was peering anxiously about her. He went quickly in her direction; there was no hesitation in his manner or mode of address now, no fear of a rebuff. He had

SINLESS

caught the glint of lovely anxious eyes, the sweet wistfulness of a beautiful face, the half-pathetic droop of warm, rich lips. He touched her arm.

"Nell!"

And she, giving a quick start, turned to him with a little half-hysterical laugh.

"Oh, Ken, it is you at last! I was so afraid you would be gone!"

They were in a public place, and Boyd was an Englishman, otherwise he would have given way to the desire which was consuming him to kiss her fondly. As it was, he took her hand into a clasp that was painful, and bent his head down to hers.

"My darling! Fancy coming out to meet me on such a night! Let us get away from here. You are staying—where?"

"At the Hotel Victoria. We must walk. I lost my way coming. And your luggage?"

"I have my bag; the rest can stay here till the morning."

As they reached the street, the woman gave a little cry of pleased surprise. With that fickleness which belongs particularly to a fog, the heavy yellow smoke had suddenly rolled back, leaving the way clear for a short distance. Beyond, it was heavier than ever, but this slight lift gave some relief. Boyd, grasping his bag, kept time in long, even strides with his companion's hurried steps, turned briskly round into Northumberland Avenue, and a minute later, with a sigh of relief, through the hotel doors. Discarding the lift, they mounted the stairs to the first floor, a page ushering them into a charming sitting-room in which a huge fire

SINLESS

crackled out to them a merry welcome. Without ceremony Boyd closed the door in his face, and, turning to the woman, took her quickly into his arms.

“Now !” he said, and with a long sigh, held her sweet, shy lips to his.

SINLESS

CHAPTER III

SHE drew herself from his embrace quickly and a little shyly. The passionate tenderness of his kisses had sent the hot colour from her throat to the roots of her hair. In the darkness and the fog she had scarcely seen his face, and now, as she saw the light of joy shining in his eyes, as she felt the pressure of his arms still about her, some new, incomprehensible touch of answering tenderness rose in her heart, and sent a little thrill of gladness through her that left her weak and nervous.

"How you have changed!" she said hastily. "Not so much in feature—though, of course, your hair being grey makes a great deal of difference—as—as—expression, manner—oh! I can hardly explain it!"

"At present," he declared, rubbing his handkerchief across his forehead, "I might be an understudy for a collier! I think you've changed too, Nell, though I knew you at once. I always knew that, lovely as you were as a young girl, as a woman you would be ten times lovelier. Sweet"—drawing her close to him again—"have you never thought what a terrible slice out of our lives those ten years have been? We have a great deal to make up to each other."

She did not answer. He could feel her heart

SINLESS

beating heavily, her hands trembling in his hold. His own eyes were moist, his voice hushed with emotion; and, as though his heart was too full for words, he turned suddenly away, passing into his dressing-room.

Nell waited to hear the click of the latch, and then fled to her own room like one possessed. There she closed the door, and stood with her face towards it, as if afraid to see it open again. What had happened—why had all the world seemed to change in this last half hour? Was she the same woman, or had she, too, been changed, as by some magic spell? There was only the breadth of a room between her and her husband—the husband whom she had not seen for ten years, to whose home-coming she had looked forward with little real pleasure. She remembered that he had been the husband rather of her mother's choice than of hers, that his position and wealth had been his chief attractions in her indifferent eyes long ago, that she had been delightfully content in her temporarily single life, and that she had thought of his return with a touch of regret of which she was ashamed, and which she would not own even to herself. And yet, at the sound of her name in his voice to-night, a touch of unaccustomed, inexplicable gladness had leapt to life within her. At the warmth of his kisses her heart had beat to suffocation; at the touch of his hands, the light in his eyes, the tenderness of his voice she had trembled, and stood shy and nervous before him, as a girl—far shyer, far more nervous than when he had taken her from her home long years ago. Her mind went back to that time swiftly, and the only clear memory it brought

SINLESS

her was that she had blessed him, then, for his matter-of-fact manner, and because he refrained from too tender exhibition of his affection.

Some sound in the next room disturbed her thoughts—the waiters bringing dinner. She threw aside her outdoor clothes, plunged her face into the warm, scented water put ready for her, and brushed out her hair swiftly, twisting it into a loose, careless knot on the top of her head, and letting its waves and little short, curled rings fall in place at will. Then she opened the wardrobe, and her hand closed upon a most becoming *négligé*. Already a half-unconscious desire to look her best in her husband's eyes possessed her.

And Boyd was wandering round the sitting-room, open, unmistakable delight expressed upon his face—pleasure that was almost boyish. He looked at its cosy hangings, at the blazing fire, at a little heap of useless needlework on a side table, an open book on a chair. Everything seemed to speak to him of happiness and the woman he had left here a few minutes ago. He went over to the dividing door, and, scarce waiting for permission, passed through it. His appreciative eyes went from the woman, gowned in some soft, shimmering white stuff, to the thousand graceful feminine knick-knacks to which they were unaccustomed, and back again to Nell's rose-tinted, pretty face. And he leant against the mantelpiece, and stretched his arms above his head with a long sigh.

“This is life!” he said softly. “Come here, Nell. You have a thousand things to tell me—of your mother, of all the people at home, all we used

SINLESS

to know—but I don't want to hear now, to-night, selfish as it sounds. I want only to hear of yourself; I want you to tell me how glad you are to be with me again, and how happy you are going to make me. You have scarcely spoken to me yet. I want you to ask me, and I want to tell you, of my life since we parted, Nell. Do you know why?" He lifted her face, and brought his own close to it. "Because—because—thank God! there is not a chapter in it I cannot lay bare for your eyes to read. It is the sort of thing any man might say—most men would—but I, because it is the simple truth. You believe that, Nell?"

"Oh yes—yes," she returned, seeming to find her voice suddenly, and for the first time yielding herself willingly to his caresses. "But I don't deserve your gentleness, your—love and faith, Ken. Oh! I know it—no one better. I don't think I can explain—I doubt if I shall ever be able to—but through all those years I have not thought of you as—as—you seem to have thought of me. It is horrible,"—feverishly—"I hate myself for it, and I am afraid you will never understand. You will be angry; I am going to be punished just when at last"—flushing crimson, but raising her eyes bravely to his—"I know all that your love might be to me."

"Nell, what do you mean?"

"Only this: I never cared for you as, I have seen since, a woman can care for a man. I suppose it was because I was a child, so ignorant and foolish. I had no idea what love was; but marriage meant new luxury and a good deal of freedom for me, and—and—be angry if you must—I was not terribly

SINLESS

disappointed when you went away. I have not longed for your return. Good heavens ! ”—passionately—“ if I had felt like that, do you think anyone could have kept me from you ? ”

He was in no mood to blame even her mother now. He had made such endless excuses for Nell during those years that pardon came very easily, and so he drew her closer, and silenced her fondly.

“ You were such a child ! ” he allowed gently. “ The blame lies with me from the beginning for consenting to leave my wife ; but since that is past and gone, Nell, can we not begin afresh ? I think that I would rather have the love of a woman than of a child, after all ”—smiling—“ and if I can teach you at last to give me that—— Shall I find the task a hard one, Nell ? ”

The hours passed swiftly ; they took their dinner *tête-à-tête*, and talked commonplace nothings for the benefit of the servants. Outside, silence reigned, and the fog grew more dense ; within, there were two hearts at least, content. Nell felt as if she were still struggling out of some odd dream ; she could not realise that this man, who was such an utter stranger to her, was her husband ; and there rose within her, above all else, a sense of undefined shame that he should hold for her irresistible attraction and she feel for him what was undeniably a tenderness of which she had believed herself incapable, that held her dumb, and rendered her pitiably shy.

The clock chiming twelve strokes broke a long silence that had fallen upon them. Boyd rose, and, drawing her over to the window, pulled aside the curtains. A dead wall of black mist met their eyes ;

SINLESS

not a sound came to their ears. They might have been the only two living, breathing creatures in all the great city. The man dropped the curtain, and stood looking down at her.

“How lovely you are !” he said below his breath. “Nell, I have said good-night to your picture every night for all these years. I shall never have to say it again.”

Then, with a swift movement, she snatched herself out of his arms, and went quickly through the half-open dividing door, and leant against it, her heart beating so that she thought it must be heard in the other room, and her cheeks aflame.

SINLESS

CHAPTER IV

AS if in derision, as if delighted at some special joke of his own, the sun shone down upon London next morning as he had rarely shone this winter. He twinkled a merry eye over all the earth, and peeped inquisitively through the lace curtains, behind which the blinds had only just been drawn up, right across the room into Nell's eyes. Nell by gaslight, in exquisitely becoming gown, was a delight; Nell in the glare of morning, in her nest of snow-white linen and soft laces, with the bright masses of her waving hair crushed beneath the weight of her head and falling round her face as though they loved their resting-place, was a dream and a revelation.

And so Boyd thought as he glanced up from the tea-cups which he was filling, at her faultlessly tinted complexion, the soft, rounded chin, the shy blue eyes that now and again met his to fall beneath the lingering tenderness of their glance.

"Cream and sugar?" he asked when he had finished regarding her with exhaustive admiration that had at last made her draw the blue silk of the coverlet over the lovelier blue of her eyes.

"Cream—no sugar, please," she returned from the temporary safety of its shelter, and in a moment more lifted herself up on one elbow, as he stood over her with a cup in each hand.

SINLESS

"Does it not seem absurd," he asked, with a light, boyish laugh, seating himself close to her on the edge of the bed, "that I should have to ask you if you take cream and sugar?"

She did not answer; and, in spite of managing his cup, he contrived to kiss the tip of one little ear, that shared the blush of the soft cheek beneath it.

"You will spill your tea, and make me upset mine," she warned him, not looking up.

"Never mind, there is plenty more." After a short silence he added:

"You are happy, sweetheart?"

The smile that came upon her lips was answer enough, the momentary pressure of her fair face against his arm.

She gave him back her cup presently, and nestled among her pillows again with her hands locked behind her head. Her eyes followed him as he went across the room.

A good-looking, well-formed man never looks better than he looks in his shirt sleeves, and Boyd had that slim, straight cut which went far to belie his years. His hair, sprinkled generously at the temples with grey, looked darker because it had been smoothly brushed down while still wet; the clear bronze of his face spoke of perfect health, and the light in his nice, kindly eyes of utter content.

Nell listened dreamily while he talked to her. All the world was new and strange to her, and though there were signs of busy life without, all around them, still it seemed to her that he and she were alone in the perfect, mysterious happiness which belonged to them—surely as it had never belonged

SINLESS

to any other man and woman. She heard the clocks striking the hour without heed for the passing of the morning. For her, time might have taken it into his head to stand still.

Boyd, coming back to her, stooped to kiss the half-closed eyes.

“Lazy little thing!” he said fondly. “Have you any idea what time it is, Nell? To-day is absolutely our own. What shall we do? I know what going home means”—with a decided head shake—“and I cannot consent to give you up to one of them yet. We will—— What shall we do, Nell?”

“You shall go away while I dress,” she declared.

“Very well. I’ll think out some plan. Half-a-moment though; I’d better just tell them about the luggage.”

He rang the bell as he spoke, and presently went half way to the door to meet the maid who answered.

“I want to send someone for my luggage at——” he began, but the maid interrupted respectfully:

“That will be for one of the porters to see to, sir. I’ll send him up to you now.”

Apparently the man was not far off, for in a few moments he was standing outside the door, which Boyd held a little open while he gave his directions.

“I want you to send over to Charing Cross for my luggage,” he said. “I left all instructions with one of the men. That’s his number,” taking a paper out of his pocket-book. “Have everything sent over here, because I don’t know what time we shall leave, or if at all, to-day. My name is on everything—Boyd.”

“Beg pardon, sir.”

SINLESS

“Boyd. My good man, you’re not deaf, are you ?
B-O-Y-D !”

In the pause which ensued, while the man still looked helpless and Boyd stared at him as though he were some kind of hopeless idiot, the maid re-entered with a telegram, which she took over to Nell, who, as Boyd closed the door a moment later upon both servants, impatiently, slid from the bed, and, throwing a wrapper hastily round her, stood looking at him with wide, terrified eyes.

“Why did you say that—why did you tell him——” she began swiftly, and then paused, the flimsy bit of paper stretched to tearing point between her stiffening fingers, while Boyd, staring wonderingly at her, came and read the message over her shoulder.

“To Mrs Forbes, Hotel Victoria, London.

“Held up at Charing Cross Hotel by fog. No idea you would venture up. Arrived home first train this morning. So sorry. Expect you earliest possible moment.—Kenneth Forbes, Holden Manor, Berks.”

“That is you ?” she said, pointing with one trembling finger to the two names, while her teeth chattered in her head as though from severe cold. “That is my husband’s and my name. How can I get a telegram from you, and you here ? And—and—you told the porter your name is Boyd ! Don’t look at me like that—answer—me—speak ! What does it mean ? Oh ! my Heaven, don’t look like that ! For God’s sake, answer me ! Aren’t you—aren’t you——”

SINLESS

The words died on her lips, for the man was looking down upon her with wide, darkening eyes that started from his face, grown white and haggard all in one moment, and was saying half aloud, incoherently, as if every syllable were being torn from him :

“Forbes—India—held up at Charing Cross—so he was—so he was !” And then, with a cry of horrified despair : “My God ! what hideous mistake is this ?”

But Nell did not answer. She had put up her hands as though to ward off a blow, and the next moment she lay senseless at his feet.

SINLESS

CHAPTER V

WHEN Nell opened her eyes they met Boyd's fixed anxiously upon her. She was lying in a big arm-chair, her head propped up by pillows ; the laces at her throat were loosened, and her hair was damp as from the recent application of water. For a moment she did not speak, for a moment clear memory would not come ; a heavy weight seemed to be pressing on her head, an odd, chill fear tugging at her heart, from which every drop of blood seemed to be going in slow drips. Then she remembered, and as she sat up, pushing the damp rings of hair from her forehead, and instinctively drawing her wrapper more closely round her, a great scorching wave of red went over her face, and faded again only to leave her deadly white.

"Don't say anything yet," Boyd entreated from his position at the other side of the mantelpiece. "Keep quiet a minute — till you are quite recovered." He spoke in calm, even tones ; no one would have guessed that it was a struggle to utter each word, that the hands thrust into his pockets were shaking, and that his heart felt to be painfully pulseless. Wonder, horror, regret, remorse were all fighting a useless battle within him, and over all there was a terrible pity for the silent woman who cowered trembling away in the corner of her chair.

"I am quite well now," she said heavily. "Not

SINLESS

“speak? Can’t you understand”—a little wildly—“that if—if this position is not explained quickly, I shall go mad? Is—it all a mistake—a hideous mistake, as you said? Oh no; it could not be, it could not happen!”

“It has! Listen to me, and for both our sakes I implore you to be calm, not to give way. You are brave, you have courage—I see it in your eyes—and thank Heaven for it, for you will want every atom of your bravery and courage now.”

She tried to rise, but her limbs shook beneath her, and he, with gentle touch, put her back in the chair.

“Listen,” he said again. “Incredible, impossible as it seems, there is, unfortunately, no doubt that you and I, by some trick of Fate, met last night absolutely by mistake. I was able to think a little, I studied that telegram whilst you were unconscious just now, and I begin to grasp a situation which appears past any kind of belief. I even know this man Forbes, who”—winning—“you say is your husband.”

“You know him!”

“We travelled over from India together; we were both the guests of a man named Brandling, who entertained us for the night we remained in Paris, and with whom we came as far as Charing Cross yesterday. He, Forbes, and I held similar posts in Bombay; we were there about the same number of years. We chanced to retire, and to return to England at the same time.”

“Then why was he not at the station to meet me—why——” she began hastily, across the man’s shortly spoken words.

SINLESS

"As you know," he returned, speaking rather rapidly, because every word of the explanation was torture to him, "there was a dense fog, the train was long delayed—outgoing trains appeared to be delayed still longer—and when we arrived, there were hundreds of people simply crowding the platforms, so that one could hardly move, and fighting their way towards the barriers. Added to that, it was almost impossible to see for the fog; and I grew a little nervous, for you—my wife, I mean—had arranged to meet me. Of course, as I received her letter just before leaving for England, you understand it is several weeks since I had the message; and she did not say then where she would stay in town. I wired to her from Paris, received a reply, and still expected to meet her at Charing Cross. Forbes' wife also was to meet him there, but the moment he saw the state of the weather he pooh-poohed all idea of her turning up, or of my wife coming either. I did not heed, and he took himself off to some warm, comfortable corner, where I left and forgot him. Then I searched the station half-a-dozen times without success. I began to think that selfish beggar—I beg your pardon—Forbes was right. After a while the crowds cleared away a little, and my search was easier. My wife had written that I must look for her by the big book-stall, and to that, now that I could do so, I made my way. What fatality"—turning to her suddenly and passionately—"what miserable chance made you wait also at that very spot?"

"I don't know," she returned weakly, kneeling close to the fire, and stretching out her cold, trembling

SINLESS

hands to the blaze. "I was nervous, I had lost my way already, and had reached the station only through the kindness of some gentleman, who piloted me through the fog. It seemed impossible to get through the people at first, and the porters said all who had arrived by the train I came to meet had then gone. I felt afraid to venture out into the streets again; I felt sure you—he—would make allowances for my being late, and—and—conclude that I should keep at one fixed spot rather than roam over the station, and so I got near the bookstall——"

"And I saw you there," Boyd went on, continuing the explanation excitedly. "My Heaven, I *knew* you! I never hesitated; doubt was nowhere in my mind—why should it be? You were at the meeting-place arranged, you were looking anxiously about for someone. I spoke your name, and you answered me, giving me mine. Good God! why did you do *that*?"

"Because my name *is* Nell, and—and his, my husband's, Kenneth."

"Identical with mine in the first syllable at any rate," Boyd answered, with a groan. "There ought"—impatently—"to be some law against any two people being christened by the same name." Then, the wild unreason leaving his voice, the impatience dying down, and only the misery left, he stooped suddenly, and, drawing her up from her kneeling position, held her there before him by both her hands.

"You poor child!" he said gently. "Heaven knows, I am the last who should utter an impatient word to you. If you could turn upon me and heap

SINLESS

on my head every possible reproach, scathe me with abuse, I think I should be almost glad. To feel the meanest coward on earth would be better than to know oneself so utterly helpless. But tell me this"—suddenly—"how in mercy's name could you ever have mistaken me for a man like—like—Forbes? My mistake was reasonable enough. My wife may not be in the least like you now, but you are just the sort of woman into which I should have said she would have grown. But I—good heavens!" recalling to mind the unprepossessing appearance of Forbes, his bulky, ungainly form, his voice, rough or wheezy with a perpetual cough, his dark face, almost covered with coarse, stubbly hair, his selfishness and boorish manners, and his evident dislike and scant respect for women. "My worst enemy would surely be puzzled to trace the slightest resemblance between us." There was a touch of pardonable annoyance in his tones, and upon him a new, wondering amazement.

"You are very like what he was ten years ago, anyhow. Changed—yes. I told you that—so very changed, but oh! so greatly for the better. But the figure, the height, the features are just the same (in a less horrible situation Boyd could have laughed), save the grey hair. Ah! but it was your manner in which I noticed most change, and I have heard"—desperately—"that life abroad alters one's manner so much. Oh! and I rejoiced in that so! I"—speaking quickly—"had almost dreaded his return. I felt that I should never be so happy again as I had been all those ten years—and then you were so gentle, so thoughtful, so companionable,

SINLESS

my heart warmed towards you. I was feeling lost and nervous and lonely in that wretched station, and from the moment you put your hand on my arm and said 'Nell,' the loneliness went—the— Oh ! ”—snatching her hands out of his, and throwing herself back in the chair, with burning face buried in the cool pillows—“ what am I saying—what am I saying ? ”

He did not answer at once. His face had grown very set and white and his eyes very dark. Up to now he had been weighed down by the horror of the situation into which they had been flung by cruel chance ; he had been racking his brains how to make that situation easy as possible for her ; he had forgotten everything, everyone, in his fierce, useless rage against himself, his unbounded pity for her, which helped her not at all. But with her low, wailing words another thought came to him ; some still, small voice kept telling him that the new tenderness which had leapt to life in her heart found answering passion in his. Let her be the veriest stranger, though till yesterday he had never looked upon her face nor heard of her existence, she was the woman who had held his love for years, to whom he had been faithful, of whom he had dreamed in her home across the seas. There could be no two such women. This one it was who had been with him in spirit, it was she whom he loved ; and that being so, what of his wife ? A great shudder went over him. At every turn the way seemed harder, the possibility of complications more to be dreaded. His wife was waiting for him in one part of the country, this woman's husband

SINLESS

for her, in another, and he and she must part at once, and go their separate ways. He moved nearer to her, and touched her shoulder.

“Nell, listen to me. Raise your head and look at me. We have explained everything to each other to the best of our ability, we have done no wrong knowingly or intentionally, we have been the victims of Fate—Chance—what you will. We have met, I suppose, as no two people ever met before or will ever meet again; and by an accident or mistake which no one would credit, no one believe possible, we are together here to-day, but an hour ago happy in the knowledge that we belonged to each other. It is not your fault and it is not mine, but that does not make the way easier for us. It has just occurred to me—I am ashamed to say only just—that there are two others to be considered whom I had utterly forgotten: your husband, and my wife. This—this—must never come to their ears. You must see that too. We must take yesterday and to-day and set them apart from our memories, shut them away from our lives. They must represent a page folded down which no eye may ever read, no hand ever unfold, for your sake and for the sake of those other two. You understand, you agree with me?” he added sharply, closing his fingers on one of her wrists, and searching her eyes closely as she made no answer. “Good Heaven! you can’t think me wrong—you can’t imagine that—that——” The words would not come, they were choked and stifled in his throat, but she read the mingled fear and doubt and misery in his eyes, and shook her head gravely.

SINGLESS

"If you and I were free," he pursued restlessly, "there would be no need for another moment's worry—there would be a simple way out of all this unbearable——"

"You argue as if I were disputing the soundness of your judgment or the fact that you are as blameless as I," she interrupted heavily. "But can't you realise that I am as anxious to fold down the page as you, to—to leave this place with all speed, to blot out memory if I only may? Oh! you are the man—you are strong—it is all so little to you; but I am the woman, and though I may be weak I am not a child or a fool, and I know what such a position means—I know that all the servants now are full of wonder and suspicion. If any see me here, if——"

"My dear child, don't worry over those trivialities. Put them away from you," he said quickly, "for they are not worth a moment's thought."

"Are they not? I took these rooms in—my own name, you gave yours when you sent for your luggage."

"Which has not been noticed. Wait a moment. Sit down there, Nell, and leave this to me." He rang the bell. "Has my luggage been brought over?" he inquired, meeting a servant half way to the door.

"No, sir. Porter can't find the man whose number——"

"Very well; leave it alone, please. I don't want it now, and when I do I'll see to it myself. You have not the intelligence of a fly among you here. Tell them at the office we are leaving in an hour."

"You are right," Nell said; "perhaps they did

SINLESS

not notice. Please go away"—dully. "I—I—must dress and pack——"

He did not attempt to touch her; he opened the door, and passed into the next room, and went over to the mantelpiece, and leant his arms upon its corner, and his head upon them.

"Little to me—to me," he thought, remembering her passionate, miserable speech—"when I know life can never hold joy or peace for me when once she has gone out of it."

Boyd had made all the arrangements for their departure; he had even ordered the cab, and was standing with his overcoat on, ready to start, when Nell came into the room. She hesitated midway between the door and the hearthrug. It seemed as though she could not lift her eyes; to utter a plain conventional good-bye was beyond her power, and, moreover, she knew that he would accompany her downstairs for appearance sake. So she stood silent, with her white face sunk as low as it would go into the great fur collar of her coat, and her hands clasped tight within her muff.

"What can I say to you—what are we to say to each other in farewell?" the man asked, reaching her side in a couple of quick strides. "Could you say honestly that you will try to let yesterday and to-day be as though they had never dawned for you?"

She only bent her face still lower.

"It would be some comfort to me, child. Women sometimes put out of their memories, in one hand-sweep as it were, even a love that has been part—best part of their lives. Could you not forget——"

She silenced him with a gesture.

SINLESS

"Don't say another word. Send me away—now, at once. And oh! if you have any pity, any mercy in your heart, take very good care that we never meet again."

And, Boyd following, she turned swiftly through the door, and into the hall, and, at the top of the stairs, right into the arms of a stout, red-faced lady, who addressed her in delighted tones.

"My *dear* Mrs Forbes! How lucky! I was just coming up on the chance of catching you before you left. Met your dear Kenneth this morning at the station as I was leaving; he was sending you a wire. Such a thousand pities that dreadful fog upset your arrangements. You've no idea how well he looks—so stout and brown, and bearded, and altogether delightful!"

Boyd, who had stepped quietly aside, decided that any woman who could use the word delightful in connection with Forbes was a hopeless lunatic not worth fearing; but Nell, whose legs were giving way beneath her, was murmuring something indistinct, and trying to escape, while the stranger continued loudly:

"Of course, dear Ken couldn't know you were going to be in town a few days, but it was a shame to miss you, after those years and years." (She pronounced it "yars and yars.") "Going to catch your train? Well, I'm going up to see Milly, who is staying here, you know. *Au revoir!*"

She saw Nell speeding down the stairs, she saw the great swing doors open and then close behind her; and the stout lady sniffed ominously. When she reached her friend's rooms she said at once:

SINLESS

“Get your chamber-maid here, and ask her who is staying in the rooms exactly five doors down. I’ll tell you why, later,” and listened intently while the maid answered the question put to her.

“Twenty-five, six, and seven, madam? They’re not occupied. The lady and gentleman have just left. Forbes was the name, madam.”

“The hussy!” muttered the stout lady, purple in the face.

SINLESS

CHAPTER VI

NELL felt that she would hate every inch of the way from Northumberland Avenue to Paddington with bitter, ungovernable hatred all the rest of her life, as well as the journey home. Hitherto she had modestly considered Holden Manor the cheeriest and cosiest house she knew; she had loved her pretty home, which lay close to the sweet, quaint village of Bray, and had idled away her summers on the gay river that was so dear to her, and her winters in the bare, brown, picturesque country which surrounded her. Now all was changed. As the train ran slowly into Maidenhead Station, as the compartment door was held open for her by one of her own men-servants, it seemed as though the clear winter sun had hidden his face behind a grey cloud, from which he would never again peep forth, or as if, shine as he might, his brilliance would be dim to her for all time. —

Surrendering her rugs and papers into the servant's hands she glanced quickly and furtively round her, half dreading to see a male figure advancing to meet her; but there was no one, and Mrs Forbes ran down to her brougham with a sigh of relief that she could not suppress. After all, it was but putting off the evil hour; but at least she might think in peace, at least she could prepare herself for a meeting that she would have given years of her

SINLESS

life to avoid. Nothing had been very clear to her since she had left the hotel and London; she wondered if anything would ever be clear to her again. She had seen people moving about her, and heard them speak; she moved herself, like an automaton, and spoke, too, when absolutely necessary, but it was all in a hazy, far-off, dreamy sort of way. She had tried to force herself to think, to come to some decision, to make up her mind to one particular course of action; but the rumble of the train and the hoot of the engine seemed to dull her brain—the one to moan at her: “What have you done?” the other to shriek in derision: “What will you do?”

What should she do? She was saying those four simple words over and over again to herself, asking a question to which there came no answer, when she was roused by the abrupt stopping of the carriage. Already she was at home! The flame from the hall fire sent a flickering, uncertain light across the bright carpet and the crimson furniture and hangings; it danced a welcome to her, and dazzled her anxious eyes; and then, from the most comfortable chair, from the shadow of the old-fashioned chimney-corner, someone rose, with stiff movements and a grunt of half pain, half irritability. It was Forbes—Forbes, with a velvet smoking-jacket on, a shawl round his shoulders, and another partly over one arm, but mostly under both feet; with a silk smoking-cap on the bald bit of his head and a huge meerschaum at one side of his mouth.

“Got back at last!” were the first words of his greeting. “Began to wonder if you got my wire.

SINLESS

Well, how are you, Ellen? 'Pon my word, you have worn well—more than you can say for me, eh?" And he laughed till he choked, and coughed for a full minute; and then, rubbing his handkerchief briskly across his mouth, pulled rather than drew her nearer to him, and pressed a careless, scrubby kiss upon her pale, trembling lips. "You would hardly have known me, would you? You're dumb with surprise, aren't you, Ellen?" he added, moving heavily back to his chair, and tucking the shawl well round his knees. "India played the very devil with my beauty, and ruined my health, but you look fresh as paint, so that's some consolation."

"You have changed—immensely," his wife said, speaking only by an enormous effort, and keeping well in the shadow; "and I am sorry you are not well, Ken-neth." The last syllable came out with a jerk. Never again could she use the short, companionable "Ken." "Is it—er—rheumatism?"

He nodded. "Yes; and liver and bronchitis. Infernal climate, you know, and deuced hard work. By the way, you're jolly close to the river here. I hope it's not damp. Can't stand it, you know—would have to go to town."

"We are a good way from the river really. And oh! it is not a bit damp—quite healthy." Nell spoke hastily. She was bewildered, and yet relieved, at his indifference, his calm, matter-of-fact meeting with her, as though they had been separated but a few days; albeit her eyes were fastened upon him in mixed wonder and horror—fastened on him, fascinated, as a child's, that watches some gnome in a pantomime, half in fear, half in amuse-

SINLESS

ment. "You will like it here, I think," she ventured after a pause, while tea was set out on a little table near the fire, and her maid came and took her furs and outdoor garments.

Forbes grunted, and Nell's trembling hands rattled the cups with rather unnecessary noise.

"For goodness sake, don't jingle that china!" the man said, irritably. "Sorry, but it sets my confounded nerves on edge. I'm all nerves—that's something else India's done for me! Made me so jolly jumpy I can't bear a creature in the room sometimes. Sugar?" turning swiftly round. "Goodness, no—nor yet cream! Why, my dear girl, my liver wouldn't stand that treatment an hour!"

Nell put a little milk in one of the cups, filled it with strong tea, and then carried it to him, with a plate of bread and butter. She pulled a low, broad stool near with her foot, and left her husband piling half-a-dozen wafer-like slices of bread and butter into irregular sandwiches. Then she lay back in a deep chair while she watched him, and while he covered his moustache and beard with tea and crumbs, till, against her will, with horror growing deeper every moment, she likened the one to a stubbly bush hanging with icicles, and the other to a chicken-run.

From that hour to her dying day she could never have described her sensations accurately. She never knew whether fear or disgust came first; she never remembered anything clearly except the squat, fat figure huddled away in a corner, disposing of tea and bread and butter in a manner that could only be described as stuffing. She had heard how the unfortunate geese were fed till they died, ready

SINLESS

to be made into *paté de foie gras*, and once someone had told her a horrible tale of how the wretched beasts were nailed by the feet to the ground, and stuffed till the abnormal size of their livers killed them. In all probability there was not a word of truth in such a tale ; but irresistibly Nell pictured Forbes nailed to the ground, careless of anything, so that the draught was kept off, and so that he had all his shawls and rugs. The silence might have lasted five minutes or five hours—Nell never knew. She was like one in a horrible dream ; a great weight seemed to lie on her chest like an iron hand, keeping her down ; a mist, through which nothing but Forbes was clear, hung about her eyes ; dreary music, interrupted by sounds he made while drinking, like the last drop of water running down the bath pipe, rung in her ears ; and over all, a voice kept whispering to her : “ That is your husband ; that is the man you married ; that is he with whom you must pass your days, so long as you or he or both shall live.”

With a startled, involuntary cry, Nell sprang to her feet ; and Forbes dropped his cup with a crash on to the polished floor, where it lay in a hundred pieces in the midst of a little puddle of tea.

“ Good Lord ! Ellen, what’s the matter ? ” he demanded shakily, while he dragged the fringe of his shawl out of the way of a little milky stream which crept saucily towards him, and stared up at his wife in amaze. “ Have you got the toothache ? You’ll have to cultivate a little more repose if you expect to live in the same house with me. Haven’t I explained that I’m a martyr to nerves ? ”

SINLESS

"I beg your pardon," said Nell, thoroughly awake now, and stooping to pick up the broken cup. "I don't know why I started so. I—I think"—with a sickly little laugh—"I must have nerves too."

"Um! Drink too much tea, I suppose. Now"—suddenly—"tell me how you managed last night. You didn't venture out in that appalling fog, of course?"

A moment's pause, the paling of Nell's face to almost the hue of death, and then a rush of scorching flame from neck to brow; a superhuman effort to gain mastery over her voice, and then she spoke.

"N—no. It—it—was too bad, was it not? No one could see, and traffic was all at a standstill."

"It was abominable!" Forbes declared. "But why the dickens you couldn't have let me know you were going to stay at the Victoria Hotel—why you couldn't have written, or even wired, to Paris, I can't understand. There was I, hung up at Charing Cross, not five minutes away, and you, I suppose, sending messengers across, and sitting up half the night waiting for me—eh?"

"Y—yes," returned Nell, and sank back again into the chair, crushed beneath the weight of this second lie.

"You were a good while getting down here, too," he said indolently. "I sent the wire early."

"Was I?" Nell wished with all her soul she could answer in a sentence of more than two words at a time. She felt Forbes' small, quick eyes upon her, and knew with humiliation that she coloured beneath them. "I—I—I—suppose there was a lot to do, and I was slow. Oh!"—suddenly start-

SINLESS

ing to her feet again, and thereby bringing another frown to her husband's forehead—"oh! I wish I *had* let you know! I wish you had met me! I wish with all my soul I had not been such a fool as to take the chances of missing you at that wretched station!" and stopped confused, her hands, that had been stretched out towards him passionately, falling limply to her sides.

Forbes regarded her with something like curiosity. Women were, and ever had been, incomprehensible to him, and he decided uncomfortably that this outburst on his wife's part was closely allied to hysteria.

"You are extravagant in your regrets or your mode of expressing them," he observed, in tones sufficiently chilling to suppress any further expressions of the kind. "It was decided waste of one hotel bill at anyrate"—reflectively. And, not noticing that Nell shrank back as if she had been struck, he continued: "Do we dine, or do you go in for country 'suppers'?"

"Certainly not"—recovering herself. "We dine at eight, unless—if—that suits you."

"Make it half-past seven, Ellen. My digestion won't stand late meals. I always go to bed at nine. And that reminds me: I've only groped round a bit, but I don't see a suitable room on this floor."

"Not a suitable room? Suitable for what?"

"If you won't strip the words out of my mouth"—with faint irritation—"I'll tell you. Suitable for me! You don't imagine I can mount flights of stairs, do you? Good heavens!" and Forbes

SINLESS

breathed more heavily at the bare idea, "I should die on the way up! No; I never go off the ground floor."

"You mean you want rooms got ready for you down here?" asked Nell, with quick anxiety he quite misunderstood. "Oh! why did you not let me know?"

"Forgot it"—laconically. "Besides, I could not write out a whole list of requirements. Don't be afraid"—with a wheezy laugh—"that the appearance of your house will be spoiled. You need not alter it much: I don't even go to bed."

"*Not go to bed!* You always sit up!" gasped Nell, aghast.

"Yes. I sleep in snatches, and in the biggest and most comfortable chair I can get; there's bound to be one about the house somewhere. I very seldom get a wink at night; it's on and off through the day that I get my best naps. Bless you, I'd choke if I laid down."

"Oh!" said Nell; and in that small word there was enough expression to fill a volume; into the short sound that left her lips lingeringly there were crowded the touches of a hundred varying tones that indicated a hundred varying thoughts. "Will you come with me now and select the rooms you would like best? There are five on this floor"—hastily—"and two are very sunny and pleasant."

"I'll have those, then," declared Forbes comfortably. "No; I needn't look at them—all rooms look alike in this light; and besides, I don't care, so that I can be warm and uninterrupted in them. I hate noise, and I hate people poking about me.

SINLESS

If I'm let alone I don't worry anyone, but if I'm bothered I'm a beastly bad-tempered beggar."

"You shall not be bothered; I will see to that," said Nell quickly, and she spoke with the first touch of brightness in her voice that could have been heard in it to-day. She even smiled a little, and the shrinking fear, which had marked her manner since the moment of her re-entrance into her home, had disappeared altogether. She even drew nearer to him, and, resting one hand upon the shawl that covered his shoulders, bent forward a little, while with the other she pointed across the hall to a heavy pair of curtains.

"They are only just over there—beyond those hangings," she said.

Forbes looked up at her; he saw the slight flush upon her pretty face, he felt the pressure of her little hand, and he read an unwelcome tenderness in her attitude. Decidedly his wife was not only inclined to be hysterical, but, worse still, to be sentimental. A strong, firm maid might grapple with the former condition, but from sentiment he alone would be the sufferer; and he felt, with a sense of injury, that he was wholly incapable of battling with it. He removed his shoulder from her clasp, and rose to his feet with some difficulty.

"There's something more, Ellen—something—er—I may as well say at once. I—er—never was a ladies' man, as you probably did *not* discover; I certainly am not one now. Why I married, God only knows!" with flattering wonder in every husky tone of his voice. "But we have lived very comfortably without each other for ten years, eh?"

SINLESS

and there's no earthly reason why we should not live now beneath the same roof just as comfortably, just as good friends, as when the seas divided us."

"None whatever—none whatever," agreed Nell, harking back to her short, jerky sentences, made up of repetitions, and striving wildly to hear her husband's voice through a sound as of rushing waters in her ears. "I—I—think I'll go now, Kenneth. I have to dress, and—and—you might take a nap by this cosy fire"—laughing feverishly. "I'll send Benson until—until your own man arrives—and you'll tell them just how you want the rooms fixed up, won't you?"

Forbes grunted; and then he watched her push the rough waves of her hair back, as though their weight worried her, and heard her little catching laugh, that sounded close to tears, and saw that she thrust a chair aside nervously and ran quickly up the wide stairs at the far end of the hall.

"A fidgety, nervous, restless woman," he said to himself disappointedly—"the most trying kind to have about one! I foresee that the last nerve I've got will be shattered!"

And upstairs Nell was lying right across her bed, her face crushed hard into the pillow, her slight frame shaken by low sobs that almost choked her, the hot tears soaking the white linen upon which they fell.

But it was not in grief alone that Nell wept.

SINLESS

CHAPTER VII

NELL lived through the next week like one in a dream. Try as she would she could not bring herself to the realisation of her position ; everything had happened, since her return home, to make the way too easy for her. She had anticipated heaven knows what misery with fear and dread that were well-nigh insupportable, and she had found the way amazingly smooth.

She wondered often if she were really alive, or if she were some spirit wandering in another world, and released only at intervals. She fought with all her strength to put aside the memory of one face, one voice, the one glimpse of utter, perfect, incomprehensible, and terrible happiness that had been hers ; she tried to take up something like her old life in the old way ; she tried to be interested in her home, and in her surroundings ; and at the end of each day she knew that her efforts were a complete failure. She wanted to turn down one page in her life's history, and, do what she would, it lay open always before her. She grew almost angry that it should be so ; she told herself again and again that it need not be. In scarcely any way was her life altered by the homecoming of her husband.

Sometimes half the day would be gone before she saw him ; his man seemed to be the one creature whom he could endure constantly in attendance,

SINLESS

and, followed by him and a bundle of shawls, Forbes emerged from his room into the cosy hall every day between the hours of twelve and one. Breakfast was served to him then ; and afterwards he might wander into the dining-room if Nell happened to be taking luncheon alone, to keep her company, he said, but in truth to do her the doubtful kindness of watching her eat, and commenting freely upon the mixtures with which he declared she was ruining her digestion.

In the afternoons, if it were moderately fine, he might accompany her in her drive ; but then the horses had to go at a snail's pace, the carriage must be a closed one, and Nell must sit in such a position that she kept off him any possible draught.

Tea was a very favourite meal with him, and it was at five o'clock only, and in the dim light of the heavily furnished, curtain-darkened hall that he ever consented to meet any of his wife's visitors. There he would sit, huddled up in his rugs, a special little table at his side, piling the bread and butter into heaps, and with his mouth crammed full of it, chuckle at, rather than with those who came to call upon Nell.

The dinner hour had now been put back a little—it had become seven o'clock : and Forbes betook himself to his beloved arm-chair half an hour earlier in consequence—and Nell's evening ended for her on the stroke of nine !

Do you think she cared ? Do you think she disliked to look forward to the long hours that must elapse before she could bring herself to go to bed ? Not she ! Nell went through the day in a dream

SINLESS

of one sort, and with the chiming of nine hours, she awoke to fall into a dream of quite another.

She had set herself a sort of task, and she performed it religiously. From that day when she had found her husband waiting for her by the hall fire, from that hour when he had taken elaborate pains to make her understand that their lives would, in the future, be lived very nearly as much apart as they had been in the past, from the hour when Nell had flung herself down upon her bed, and sobbed her heart out in passionate thankfulness for the selfish coldness of the man from whom she had dreaded a word or glance of tenderness, she had made up her mind that the day should be his, and the night hers.

Such alterations as he desired in the daily routine she yielded him willingly, gladly—so willingly and gladly that Forbes suspected a desire upon his wife's part to stand very well in his eyes—so much of her society as he desired she gave him ungrudgingly ; to his tastes and his fads she pandered with so much tact that he was hardly aware of it. And when the day was over—out of which there were few hours at best given to him—she saw his servant come for him like a nurse for a child ; and she watched him stumbling through the hall and the rooms, over the fringe of his eternal rug, and she felt his stubbly beard scratch her on the forehead or in the eye, in that salute which he evidently thought she expected, and which did duty for a good-night kiss. And she heard his door close upon him ; and in her heart there rose a murmur of thankfulness which found utterance on her lips in the barely-framed words—"Thank God !"

SINLESS

And afterwards the hours—those most precious hours of all the twenty-four—were hers.

To-night Nell was a little restless ; her day had been spent mostly in the house, in the rooms which were her husband's, because he had caught a bad cold ; and he had divided his attention—while she read to him the newspapers—between sips of glycerine and whiskey, and a carbolic smoke ball, the use of which sent cold shivers down Nell's back.

Her head ached a little, and the house felt close.

“Every window and door shut,” she murmured to herself with a faintly impatient movement, “Is it any wonder that my head seems to swim ? ” And took up a light shawl, and wrapping it closely round her shoulders, went out of the house and down the garden paths till she reached the road side. There she was as much alone as in her own garden ; there all was silence. The long, winding road was utterly deserted, the young winter moon shone down upon her, a solitary, lonely, lovely figure, as she leant against the side of the wooden gate which divided the road from her grounds, and lifted her face, with a little tired smile, to the cloudless sky above her. f

“Must all life be like this—always—through the next forty years which I am likely to live ? ” Nell asked herself, not for the first time during the past week. And when the question had passed her lips half aloud, reproached herself for its utterance, for the thought which prompted it. “How better could I live it ? How more kindly could fortune have treated me ? Should I not be glad indeed that my days are passed shut up within the four

SINLESS

walls of my own home—that by degrees I shall drop out of the memory of old friends—that—that—there is scarcely any alteration in the old life I have led for ten years. It was not hard, ten days ago—Heaven in its mercy has smoothed the way for me . . . and yet, and yet—oh, God !” lifting her eyes again to the pale moon that, set lovingly beside her companion star, shone coldly, mercilessly down upon the lovely, troubled face upraised in unconscious pleading, “if it must be so why did I ever learn—why did I ever know how full of joy and how crowded with misery life could be ?” Faintly as the words were spoken they sounded in her own ears in loud, unjust reproach that was wickedness, addressed as they were to the heavens above her ; and Nell bowed her head on the top bar of the gate that was silver-frosted, and struck icily cold to her hot forehead. Every night for more than a week she had come down here to be alone and to think—to think, though she knew that way madness lay. Every night here, and in the solitude of her own room she had fought a desperate battle with the memory that would haunt her, that kept fast hold of her. Her prayers for forgetfulness were unanswered ; and strive as she would to put the knowledge from her, it came home to her every hour of the day and night that never again could she take up the threads of life where she had left them on that fatal day when she had set out from her home to meet her husband in London.

A quick step on the road, not a dozen yards from her, roused Nell. With a start she looked up to see a man turning the corner which bent round

SINLESS

just by the gate on which she still leant ; and the blood leapt to her face, and then seemed to ebb slowly from her heart till a horrible feeling of faintness almost overcame her. That bold, quick walk, the upright carriage, the spare figure, yet fine, broad shoulders—the moon-light made them all clear and distinct ; it only threw the face in shadow, and left the features unrecognisable at this distance.

A moment more and the man had reached her side.

“ I wonder,” he said, lifting his hat and trying to meet Nell’s eyes, “ if you could direct me to Holden Manor——?” and paused in some little natural astonishment because her answer was a long sigh that told plainly of keen relief, and a nervous laugh that sounded very close to tears. “ I should be very grateful,” he added, “ for I am ashamed to say I have lost my way completely.”

Then Nell, recovering herself, looked up at the speaker, and pointing to the house behind her said :

“ You have lost yourself at your destination, then—this is the Manor House.”

“ Indeed ! How fortunate ! It is rather late to make a call,” smiling, and wondering whom she might be, “ but in spite of that I must confess that I came down to see Mr and Mrs Forbes——”

“ I am Mrs Forbes,” said Nell, and the stranger had hard work to silence the “ Never ! ” which rose to his lips. “ You must be a friend of my husband’s, since I have not the pleasure of knowing you—won’t you come up to the house now you have found it ? ”

“ My name is Brandling,” he returned, accepting the invitation and following her along a narrow path,

SINLESS

still lost in open admiration, and in secret amazement. This Forbes' wife! This woman who in the moonlight looked so dazzlingly lovely—this the woman whom Forbes had left behind him when he went to India, and to whom he had been very grateful for consenting to stay behind. For a long moment Brandling could not get beyond his own introduction of himself; but Nell did not seem to notice, and when they came to a wider piece of the path, turned to him with a friendly little smile. If he had only known how intense was her gratitude to him for being himself, and not the man she had for one horrible moment feared he was, he would not have been surprised.

"I wonder that you could get lost in this little place," she said, "especially if you have come straight from town."

"But I have not, Mrs Forbes; and I ought to know Bray like the A B C. Only somehow the houses seemed to me to have got pushed out of place, or else my memory of some years ago serves me badly. No, I came down last night to stay with the Champerownes at Maidenhead for the week-end—you know them?"

"Oh yes."

"Then, through them I heard that Forby—I beg your pardon, we always call him that—was living at the Manor. You know we travelled over from India together, Mrs Forbes. I had only the name of his club; and when I heard I was so near I took the liberty of hunting him up. We were immensely late getting away from dinner to-night, and I left the others at the station and lost myself coming

SINLESS

here—Good gracious! you're not ill are you, Mrs Forbes?"

The young captain broke off in his rapid chatter as Nell swayed slightly in his direction, and as he saw that her face was white as death. The one word India had flung her memory back into the dreaded channel again, the knowledge that she was conversing with one of the companions of her husband on his homeward journey brought to her mind with painful force the memory of another, who had been his companion too. With an effort she forced a little laugh.

"Not at all! I believe I am just a little cold. Pray come in," and pushed open one of the low windows, and led the way to the most cheery of rooms where the lamplight burned low, and logs crackled merrily on the broad hearth.

"I shall go and tell Kenneth," she said, still struggling with an odd feeling of faintness, "but I am afraid he will not come out of his rooms even for an old friend."

"Don't ask him to, Mrs Forbes—I don't deserve to be received at all——" Nell cut him short with a little hand-wave, and left him.

"What eyes! What teeth—what a skin—what hair!" breathed the impressionable young captain, with his back turned to the fire and his hands thrust into his pockets. "Great Scott! and all that Forby's! My stars! Fancy living in India with a wife like that in England. . . ."

Thought failed him. The terrible, reckless ingratitude of some people struck him with unusual force, and mingled oddly with a sense of undefined

SINLESS

pity. Before he had time to think the matter out further, Nell returned.

"Kenneth will be charmed to see you if you will excuse his remaining in his room," she announced ; and now the colour had come back to her cheeks, and there was brightness in her eyes that but enhanced their beauty in Brandling's. "You say you have dined ? "

"Many thanks, yes."

"Then come with me." She led him through two rooms, and across the hall to where, at the opposite side, a little passage was shut off by heavy curtains. From behind them there came the sounds of a hard wheezy cough, varied now and then by a mild, impatient oath.

"Who the devil's opening the door ? What the —Oh, hallo, Brandling ! You ! By Jove ! this is something like a surprise ! "

Captain Brandling advanced with his customary breezy good humour, but Forbes waved him back.

"I can't shake hands—and for God's sake don't come near my foot ! Full of gout, you know. It's this cursed climate—winter's enough to kill an ox ! I'm sure it's being so near the confounded river—my wife says not, but I'm sure of it all the same. Glad to see you—didn't know you were coming to-night."

Nell stared at him. He must be a little light-headed.

"I just told you," she said, looking at the amused captain with an odd uplifting of her pretty brows. "You said——"

"You came over and blew in my ear—I don't

SINLESS

know what you told me. Make it a rule never to listen to women's chatter—good rule, Brandling." The captain said "Oh!", thought he could listen to the chatter of Forbes' wife for ever, and wished with all his heart that she had blown in his ear.

"So you don't like the climate," he replied with intent to change the subject. "You haven't had time to get used to it. As you did not listen to Mrs Forbes"—with a little glance from his handsome eyes at Nell, who had thrown herself back in a chair well in the shadow—"perhaps you didn't hear that I have been putting in the week end with the Champerownes."

"Why the dickens do you shout? I'm not deaf, if I have got the gout! Oh, the Champerownes? Not seen anything of them, though Ellen says they are at Maidenhead often. Nobody but a lot of tea-drinking old women ever come here!" Brandling stared. The society of such a woman, who listened indolently now to the peevish grumblings of her husband, wasted upon tea-drinking old women! Called by such a name as Ellen! It was sacrilege. "Not that I want 'em," added Forbes, pausing to wrestle with a fit of coughing, and then applying the carbolic ball, to the open and intense delight of his visitor. Before the performance was over, Brandling was in fits of laughter which Nell found contagious.

"I'll tell you what," he said, glad enough that his host was too much absorbed in his own miserable discomfort to notice that he was affording amusement. "There's nothing like a complete change to get rid of a cold—you haven't got over the effects

SINLESS

of your entrance into London in what they tell me was the worst fog known for fifty years—it's got completely on your chest, and you want a good bracing place to throw it off. Now, this place isn't bracing, whatever else it may be. Come and stay with me for a bit—you and Mrs Forbes—eh? what?"

"With you?" demurred Forbes after a long minute's pause for thought, in which the captain's eyes sought and appealed to Nell, who did not respond by the least touch of interest. "Where's your place? Warwickshire, isn't it?"

"No, Wiltshire. Mrs Forbes, I appeal to you—first that you yourself will honour me, and next that you prevail upon your husband to see the wisdom of my suggestion."

"Personally, I should like it very much," answered Nell, rising and coming towards both men with a graceful undulating movement which attracted Brandling greatly. "But Kenneth——"

"I think I should like it too," struck in Forbes. "I'm a trifle bored with this place already. We'll have to move I think—river's a rubbishing place for the whole of the year. Very well, Brandling, when shall it be? There are the decanters on the table over there; help yourself—me? no, I'm taking glycerine and whiskey. When do you go down yourself?"

"To-morrow; but it must be whenever most convenient to Mrs Forbes. I'm awfully obliged to you both for saying you will come," with a slight, very graceful bow to Nell. "We shall be able to amuse you, I hope. You'll write and let me know

SINLESS

when to expect you, won't you, Forbes? Hedlam Park, and Dering is the station. Now I really must get away or I shall not make that train——"

"Let me order a trap," said Nell, going towards the door. "Yes, I insist. They won't take five minutes to put the dog-cart to."

"Upon my soul I envy you, Forbes," declared Brandling, when Nell was out of earshot.

"Me? What—the gout?"

"Not quite! Your charming wife."

"Oh," said Forbes, with a grin. "Well, don't try your well-known fascinating powers there, old chap! We know it's your metier to console unhappy married ladies; but Ellen's out of the list. She's quite devoted to me"—with a touch of half-complaint that divided Brandling between disgust and laughter. "A conscientious, straightforward woman, you know, Brandling, but between ourselves, impressionable, romantic, sentimental! At my time of life and in my state of health, I ought to have a good, domesticated, middle-aged wife who—but there, we all make fools of ourselves in our youth. Thank God I never let her come out to India to me—I should have had no end of trouble with her in a place like that! I suppose," dismissing his wife easily from his mind, and the mention of India evidently carrying his thoughts into another channel, "you never saw anything of that chap Boyd after we left him?"

Whatever the captain's answer, Forbes was doomed not to hear it, for at that moment Nell entered to announce that the trap had come round. She accompanied Brandling to the door herself, and

SINLESS

stood a moment in the moonlight to see him drive off.

“ I wonder if I shall care to go to his place,” she thought without much interest. “ I assented, feeling sure Kenneth would disagree with me as usual.”

“ Good Lord ! ” said Brandling to himself, staring hard at the ears of Forbes’ horse. “ I’ve come upon Beauty and the Beast at last, and, by Jove ! my sympathies are with poor Beauty and no mistake ! ”

SINLESS

CHAPTER VIII

THE proposed visit to Captain Brandling's country home was the only thing about which Nell had seen her husband in the least keen.

She felt that her surprise was perhaps unnecessary considering how very little she knew of his tastes after all—one might be a taste for living in other people's houses; there were those who possessed it to an alarming degree. But certainly Forbes showed the first sign of interest, the only sign of pleasure that he had shown since his arrival at home.

If Nell had been a little more interested herself she might have wondered more than she did, but it made little difference to her whether her husband was pleased or cross, whether he chose to be amiable or disagreeable. She could always escape from him, and it was part of the bargain she had made with herself that she should bear with him patiently during the few hours they spent in each other's society. She was not altogether displeased at the prospect of a little change herself, though it would not have occurred to her to seek it; for the first time her home had lost some of its beauty and its comfort, in her eyes; for the first time she was willing to turn her back upon it.

Hitherto Mrs Forbes had been regarded by her friends with some wonder, chiefly because she would

SINLESS

not listen to their suggestions of flats, a hotel life, or even apartments ; because they could not understand a woman making her home in a place like Bray all the year round, and being content to fill her house at intervals with congenial companions, and to run up to town whenever she felt inclined. Hers had been an enviably delightful life, with all the freedom that only a married woman can know, and none of the ties ; and she had lived it quietly and very enjoyably.

How long was that ago ? Was it years or only months ? Could it be possible that in reality it was only a little more than a week ? Nell failed to realise that it was in truth but ten—now nearly eleven—days since the whole scene had been changed for her. And with that change had come her first touches of restlessness and fear, of unhappiness and discontent.

She had known women who craved continually for change and had wondered at them, she had seen those whose hearts were breaking slowly for a love, a happiness that might never be theirs, and though she was the most tender-hearted of women, she had failed utterly to comprehend their discontent and their misery.

But she understood at last—and she had bought her knowledge at the price of her whole life's peace. She knew now with the fresh sickening touch of dread that was upon her always, that go where she would she could never find rest or peace ; she knew why her surroundings were hateful to her. And she foresaw that nothing but continual change, nothing but the empty, so-called amusements, the life that

SINLESS

was all froth, in which many of her friends steeped themselves, would content her.

She had not fully awakened to this fact till Brandling had tendered his invitation. Even then, in her first feeling of disinclination to accept it, she had hoped that her husband would raise objections—now she was a little glad that he had not. Nell thought that she should rather like Brandling; he seemed to be the personification of good nature, and he was a handsome, merry boy. The knowledge that he was her husband's companion on the voyage from India had almost set her against him at first because it revived memories she was continually endeavouring to crush down, but she told herself this was folly indeed. A hundred people had been companions of Forbes, perforce—at any time she might meet anyone of them, and, after all, what of it?

“At anyrate the plunge is taken,” she said to herself two days later when, at her husband's dictation, she had written to Brandling and bidden him expect them on the Friday of the next week. “This place is positively unbearable—I suppose it's poor Kenneth who makes it so—and I am growing afraid of my own shadow. It wouldn't do—it couldn't go on long without ending in disaster. Shut up here I would not answer for myself—I must do what thousands of others do, mingle with the world, live from hour to hour in the excitement of the time being, and forget in that way, if I may forget in no other!”

It was an easy resolution, and for the moment it brought her some comfort; and in her preparations for departure she was very nearly happy. But

SINLESS

Nell did not know that she was very ignorant of the world and its ways. She wanted to forget, and for forgetfulness she was ready to pay almost any price.

Friday arrived, and with it a heavy snow-storm that bid fair to make their journey impossible. Forbes grumbled, but still refused to leave his rooms before the usual hour ; and the result was that he and his wife found themselves in London a great deal later than they had intended.

"It makes no difference," Forbes kept continually repeating, when at every turn there was some delay. "We shall get there in time for dinner at any rate—I expect Brandling is one of those young fools who dine in the middle of the night ! That's the one objection to visiting—one has all one's regular ways upset." Nell laughed—she could not help it, for to-day, why she could not have said, she felt in something like one of her old merry moods. Everything had made her laugh since the early morning, from Forbes' irritable grumblings, his wonderful appearance, to the violence of the storm which made their journey a difficult one. Her husband now regarded her severely. Standing as he was upon the platform, a rug wrapped carefully round his legs and a shawl round his shoulders, a cap with ear-flaps tied firmly under his chin, and his teeth chattering, his severity was somewhat wasted because it was so intensely comic. Many were the curious glances bestowed upon both him and the woman at his side, many were the remarks passed, in low whispers. But Nell did not heed the glances or hear the remarks.

As the train backed slowly into the station she

SINLESS

heaved a small sigh of content, and left her husband to the tender mercies of his man while she provided herself with unlimited papers and magazines. She saw out of the corner of one eye that a guard was being ordered to label one carriage "Engaged," that an unfair allowance of footwarmers was being demanded, that the windows were being tightly shut, and that finally Forbes himself was being gently pushed from behind into the carriage and deposited, panting and swearing, in the far corner. This performance over, he signed impatiently to his wife to hurry; and Nell, fresh and fair, clothed from head to foot in furs, adorably lovely, and in his eyes exasperatingly young, obeyed.

"This train does not arrive till seven," he announced. "I hope to goodness Brandling won't think we're not coming!"

"Just starting, sir," put in his man quietly. "Everything you will need is in the bag," and he pointed to a bag reposing on the seat by Forbes' side. Then he closed the door and made his way quickly to another compartment further down.

"You seem amused, Ellen," Forbes observed when they had well started, and as he looked up to see a little smile upon his wife's pretty lips. "And I should imagine," testily, "that you are quite insensible to cold."

"Not quite insensible," she returned good-humouredly. "I feel it of course, but I suffer nothing from it—I don't get a red nose, you know, or pink eyelids. Won't you have the other foot-warmer? My feet are quite warm, thank you."

He looked at her rather hard. Was it possible

SINLESS

that she was attempting to make fun of him? He had one warmer for each foot as it was, and a hot rubber bag at his back; and it had not occurred to him to ask after her comfort. But Nell was smiling brightly, and looking through a paper, and had evidently made him the offer in good faith.

"You can read to me if you like," he said a few moments later, graciously. His wife opened the paper at once, and started with the very latest murder. Forbes did not listen at first; he was thinking to himself of her, of her manner towards him, her direct obedience to his lightest command.

"I did well to begin as I knew we must go on," he thought with much self-gratulation. "She'd have been over affectionate, too demonstrative if not! She's a little hysterical still——" Then he lost that train of thought, and fell to marvelling at the blind faith of women—of some women, not women in general. He thought with satisfaction that Nell was good-tempered and sweet-natured, and he saw himself moulding her into shape according to his own particular taste.

"I only hope she won't be petted and spoiled and made love to by half the men, and so grow independent," he reflected, without, however, any great fear; and fell asleep and snored loudly for the rest of the journey. He went to sleep with the thought that there was a possibility of this visit not being good for Nell, and he continued his slumbers to the tune of the rumble of wheels, and dead to memory of anything or anybody.

When at last he awoke it was with a start, to find Nell gently shaking him, and trying to restore to

SINLESS

shape his cap, ear-flaps and all, which had got twisted under his chin.

"Are we there? By Jove, I must have got forty winks! Oh, no, I've not been to sleep long—you always try to make out that I get plenty of rest—I heard every word you read; but I was dreaming then, that there was something for dinner I did not like!" His half awake tone was so pathetic, so absurdly disappointed, that Nell had to bury her face in her muff. Then she jumped out of the carriage, and almost into Brandling's arms.

"I came to meet you myself," he said holding her hand firmly and gladly, his handsome boyish face beaming with pleasure, and his eyes alight with admiration. "I thought you were going to basely throw me over at the last moment."

"No, it was the snow that made us late—the snow and Kenneth's determination not to get up a quarter of a minute earlier than usual." She released her hand as she spoke, and stood by her host while Forbes crawled out of the train, and the guard waited impatiently to blow his whistle.

"Here we are at last," declared Nell's husband, "Come to meet us, eh? Very nice of you! Hope it's not a ten mile drive."

"No, four. Look here, Worth," turning to Forbes' man, "if you'll see after the luggage, and come on in the dog cart you'll be there before us."

The horses were swift, the roads, down here, clear and dry, the moon was just beginning to show in the darkening heavens. Nell could see that the swift motion brought a grimace of agony every now and then to her husband's face, she could hear him

SINLESS

try, very badly, to stifle a groan, as more than once he was shot forward against Brandling ; and she was aware that the young captain was heartlessly forgetful of his old friend's sufferings.

"My mother is very anxious to know you, Mrs Forbes," he was saying, "You know I have described you, and as a thing of beauty is indeed a joy forever to her, as to her son, you will understand that anxiety——"

"Lady Brandling alive, eh?" broke in Forbes surprisedly.

"Oh, very much! It's why I am here—she has been very ill you know, and wanted me with her. We shall not have many people staying in the house, because the mater is not up to entertaining them; but we have some very jolly neighbours, Mrs Forbes, and they won't let you grow dull."

"Nor will you, I am very sure," returned Nell. "What sweet country it seems to be—look at the moon shining on those fields over there and the great bank of trees behind them," she cried delightedly, "oh, and that big house beyond, just up on the hill! The lights are twinkling all over it, as if to welcome someone."

"They are welcoming you," declared the captain, amused at her enthusiasm, "that is Hedlam." And before Nell could express any further admiration the horses turned in through wide-open gates and went swiftly over a long, winding drive, to come to a halt before a door which was instantly thrown open.

Beyond, there was a large hall in which two fires, one at each side, were burning gaily. Round the

SINLESS

sides, and drawn close to the table in the centre, were chairs of all shapes and sizes, mostly large enough to lose oneself in ; and at a distance, well on the right, there stretched upward a broad flight of stairs, their crimson carpet showing bright and warm against the massive darkness of the woodwork.

Nell drew a small sigh of pleasure as she looked round, and as an old lady leant forward to greet her.

"I cannot come to meet you, my dear," she said smiling up at Nell who went hastily to her side, "but I can say welcome to Hedlam, and that I do right heartily. Ah, Mr Forbes," giving that gentleman her disengaged hand, "it is a good many years since we met ! Dear, dear, is it rheumatism that is making it hard for you to walk ? Well, well, it is fortunate that you have a young pair of legs to do the running for you. Give me a kiss, my dear," pulling Nell gently down to her, "I like your face, and I'm a good judge !"

Nell smiled and obeyed, and the eyes that she raised to Brandling's were moist, as he leant forward to whisper :

"Did I not say that my mother's tastes and mine are one ?" while Lady Brandling claimed all Forbes' attention.

"I have ordered tea in your room," the old lady said turning to Nell, "though it is so late ; here comes Marie to show you the way." With a word or two of thanks, Nell followed a pretty, trim little maid up the stairs, while Brandling took possession of Forbes.

"I'll show you your way," he said in an under-

SINLESS

tone, struggling to link his arm through a heavy shawl, in his friend's.

"I got your letter, old chap—and of course I quite understood. It would be deuced bad for you to try and mount stairs wouldn't it? Oh, and I've put Worth in the next room to yours, and of course you know you are to do exactly as you like about appearing or not appearing whenever it suits you." He led the way to another part of the house, and presently opened a door which led into a very handsome and comfortable suite of rooms which he introduced to Forbes as those set aside for his use.

His guest looked round with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Anyone here I know?" he inquired, and after the faintest hesitation Brandling answered:

"No. Not yet. We expected the Chesneys and Mrs Beaufoy; but they have postponed their visit for a day or two. We are alone till then—and—er—just one or two people to dine to-night, whom I don't suppose you know."

"What time do they dine? What did Captain Brandling say?" Forbes inquired of Worth when his host had gone.

"Half past eight, sir."

"That's nearly an hour—well, go and get me some biscuits and a glass of sherry."

SINLESS

CHAPTER IX

UPSTAIRS, in her own room lighted by candles which stood in clusters on the dressing-table and the mantelpiece, and on brackets in each of the four corners, Nell was toasting her little feet by the fire, and staring thoughtfully into the dancing flames that shot far up the wide chimney with a gentle hiss, as on their way, they licked round the big, crackling logs.

“Am I really, after all, one of those mindless, soulless creatures who are happy or miserable according to the joy or the trouble of the moment?” she asked herself a little wonderingly, and very disappointedly. “Will forgetfulness come easily in spite of all my fears, and will a life of pleasure compensate me for the loss of a life of sweet content?” Nothing but the crack of the wood gave her answer; and Nell went on wonderingly, still, and half aloud.

“Yesterday I was the most unhappy woman on earth; to-night—why is it, why should it be?—there is life in my heart once more, there is——” She made a half impatient gesture, and let her face fall forward against the great arm of the chair.

It seemed to her impossible that she could be light-hearted again, impossible that she could look forward to any part of the future with even the barest touch of pleasure; yet, all day her natural merriment had asserted itself. Her laugh had rung

SINLESS

out gaily as of old, she had listened to her husband's dissatisfied grumblings and his chilling, half sarcastic complaints with patience, and even a little amusement ; she had turned her back on her home with a sense of content, and all through the journey, up to this very moment, she had felt the pleasurable excitement of anticipated enjoyment. Why ? It was the question she kept asking herself. There seemed to be no reason that she could think of. Pleasures were not new to her, the paying of a possibly enjoyable visit was no novelty. To all the ease and luxury which might be hers here, she was well accustomed in her own home. Yet there had been upon her all day the feeling that she was looking forward to something which would bring her more than mere pleasure, with the eagerness of a school-girl—and what it was she could not imagine.

“It must be that this last week of close confinement to the house has been too much for me,” she decided rather helplessly. “Though I sought the retirement and the quiet, they were evidently not good for me. I let myself think too much—I suppose a wise woman would never have allowed herself to think at all !” And Nell laughed harshly, and sprung suddenly out of her chair, and stood looking at herself by the light of the candles in the mirror. “I am not even changed, I am not pale or worried-looking, there is not a sign of unhappiness about me ; and yet I feel that I dare not look the world in the face.” She put her hand up to her bare throat as if to loosen something that was bound tightly round it, and shut her eyes as if, with the closing of them, she could close out memory.

SINLESS

A slight tap upon the door roused her. It was welcome to her, for decidedly she must avoid being alone. In answer to her soft "Come in," Marie, the maid who had shown her to her rooms, entered.

"Her ladyship bade me ask if I could help you, madam," the girl said advancing into the room. "And if I can I shall be pleased, as you have not brought your own maid."

"That is kind of Lady Brandling, and you too, Marie," returned Nell, in her own unaffected, pleasant manner. "I never had a maid in my life, and I don't fancy I should care about one—my parlour maids manage very well for me. If you will come when I ring, Marie, and lace up my gown——"

"Certainly, madam. And may I remind you that the dinner hour is half-past eight?"

"Oh, thank you," with a little start, "I had forgotten!"

Twenty minutes later Marie re-entered the room at Nell's summons; and only her perfect training kept the admiration and surprise out of her quick, appreciative eyes.

Mrs Forbes was standing by one of the long mirrors, her bodice in her hand and her toilette almost complete. Her hair, soft and bright and waving, was coiled high on the top of her head, and held in place by little amber pins, except where it escaped from their hold and lay in tiny rings close to her ears, and at the nape of her neck. Her bare neck and shoulders gleamed like ivory in the mellow light, and her eyes shone like twin stars.

When the last touch was put to a toilette that was perfect in its beautiful simplicity, the little

SINLESS

maid stood aside with a sigh that expressed the pleasure she dared not speak.

"It is quite all right then, Marie?" Mrs Forbes asked, divining the girl's thoughts.

"Madam is lovely—the gown a dream! On that fall of lace, might I say this bunch of violets——?" she ventured, darting to the glass in which Nell had put the violets off her muff, and shaking them dry on her apron. Then she came nearer and against the pale yellow of Nell's gown, and the richness of the lace that fell from the low bodice, she put the flowers with deft fingers.

"I suspect you of being an artist, Marie," declared Nell with a sweet bright smile of thanks as she hastened away from the little maid, along the winding passages to the main staircase.

"Good Heaven!" murmured Marie, with a quick uplifting of her dark eyebrows, "the wife of that old bundle downstairs—that, I suppose," with quick intuition, "is a very rich bundle all the same!"

When Nell entered the drawing-room two pairs of eyes looked up at her with open admiration. The third pair, which belonged to Forbes, were shut. Brandling and his mother did not speak at once, and they forgot that it was not good manners to stare.

"I am not late, am I?" asked Nell, going to Lady Brandling's side, and holding out her chill little hands to the fire. There was a slight flush on her cheeks, brought there by the delight in Brandling's eyes, and the sight of her husband calmly snoring in a huge chair that had evidently been introduced into this room at his request.

SINLESS

“Not a bit—our guests are, however. Ah, I hear the snort of a motor now, surely!” Nell made a little impatient movement with her hand in the direction of Forbes.

“Why don’t you wake him, and make him talk?” she said in a distressed whisper. “He’ll sleep all the time if you don’t—right through dinner and all. Don’t let him be ridiculous.”

Brandling went over and poked Forbes in the side.

“I was telling you,” he said loudly, because he could never remember that the man was not deaf, “I was telling you that I had a little surprise in store for you to-night, and you went to sleep!”

“Beg pardon, I’m sure,” returned Forbes, waking at once, and sitting bolt upright. “If you mind my dropping off to sleep now and again you mustn’t ask me here—it’s the saving of my life. Well, go on about the surprise.”

“I only said that to wake you. No, as a matter of fact I ran up against a fellow and his wife the other day in town who are staying about five miles only from here. You know him, he was at Bombay with us, and——”

The door opened at this moment, cutting short Brandling’s information and causing all but Nell to look up, as the old butler held aside the curtains. Then, in his thin voice he announced:

“Mr and Mrs Boyd.”

What saved Nell from going headlong into the fire she could never have told. In a hazy, far-off way she heard that one name uttered in the cracked tones of the old servant, and repeated in the captain’s hearty, rather loud voice. It seemed to be flung

SINLESS

at her, to strike on her ears with the sudden startling force of a pistol shot. From that moment to the day of her death she never knew what happened. She was conscious of clinging to the back of Forbes' chair for a moment and of sending up a wild, voiceless prayer for strength to hear and see, for power to fight down the deadly faintness that was overcoming her.

Then as in a dream she heard Brandling performing the introduction :

“Mrs Forbes, allow me to present Mrs Boyd, the wife of a very new friend of mine, and unfortunately a stranger to me till the other day,” the captain was saying in that pleasant, flattering tone he used unconsciously to all women. “Boyd, let me introduce you to Mrs Forbes. I didn't say a word about your being here you know, because I thought it would be a surprise for Forby, eh, Forby? We had such a jolly time together coming over, you know, Mrs Forbes, and I quite feel that we are on board again. Ah! some more late arrivals.” He left them, then, and went to meet the new-comers, three men and a little woman who talked loudly; his mother was talking to Mrs Boyd and Forbes, and Nell and Boyd were standing side by side a very little apart from the rest. For one moment he contrived to get between her and the eyes of everybody in the room, and in that moment a quick whisper left his scarcely parted lips :

“Courage, Nell—for God's sake don't break down!”

The few words acted like magic; they brought her to life as it were again, they recalled her to the

SINLESS

memory that her silence would presently become remarkable. She felt that she was white as death, knew that her legs were threatening to give way beneath her ; but the room ceased suddenly to swim round her, and the faces of her companions became clear.

By a mighty effort she controlled her voice sufficiently to say a few words to one and the other, while once more she sought and found the support of Forbes' chair.

"Don't scratch that velvet !" he exclaimed softly, but not the less irritably, looking up at her with a frown. "You know it sets my teeth on edge." Nell removed her fingers just as Brandling reached her side once more.

"You will take Mrs Bemister in, Boyd," he said in his busy manner which somehow suggested boyish delight in everything. "And you," to Forbes, "will take in Mrs Boyd." Then bending down to Forbes' ear : "You'll like her I should say—just the sort of woman, I imagine, whom you were going to describe the other night——"

"Dinner is served." This information in the butler's thin squeak.

Brandling gave Nell his arm, Boyd turned to give his to Brandling's mother ; and how the rest were paired Nell did not see. Without her host's support she felt that she could not have walked out of the room, and the pressure of her fingers upon his coat sleeve encouraged Brandling to squeeze the soft arm gently against his side.

A few moments later Nell found herself seated at the table, which was mercifully lighted by candles

SINLESS

that were shaded. The knowledge that the weight of her body was taken off her trembling legs brought her some relief, in that she was in less danger of fainting ; she was able to lean back, and, while everybody chattered, to recover herself sufficiently to look round at her neighbours. She was on the right of Brandling, who was at the head of the table ; Mrs Boyd was on his left with Forbes on her other hand. Next to him came the loud-voiced little woman whom Nell now knew to be Mrs Bemister, and beside her, Boyd.

Lady Brandling occupied the foot of the table, and on her left, between her and Nell, sat Bemister and the two other men whose names Nell had not caught.

Mrs Boyd was the most attractive person in the room to Nell, who found the utmost difficulty in keeping her eyes off the woman to whom Forbes was making himself unusually amiable.

She was a woman who might once have been a fair height, but who seemed as if she had shortened as she had grown broader. She had a short, rather thick neck, a complexion that had once been "peaches and cream" and was now what is described as "ruddy" ; her chin had doubled itself generously, her eyes, which were a beautiful blue, were half-hidden beneath fat eyelids, and her nose—a small perfectly-shaped, tip-tilted, dainty feature which had suffered alteration in no way, was very nearly lost between the round, full cheeks. It was unlikely that she was more than thirty, but she was dressed in a manner which added years to her age—dressed without taste and without care, in something black silk with a good

SINLESS

deal of dull jet upon it, and very evidently made by the "home" dressmaker. The bodice was cut square in a half-hearted, shy sort of way, and the sleeves stopped short abruptly, a little below the elbow. Round her neck Mrs Boyd wore a narrow bit of velvet ribbon tied in a chubby little bow under the left ear, and seeming to want nothing to finish it off so much as a bell; and her hair, which was nice, bright wavy hair, was drawn tightly back from her face and coiled into a lump somewhere midway between the top of her head and the nape of her neck. She gave one the impression of being upholstered rather than dressed; and it was plain that, like Forbes, she took a lively interest in the menu. But she had a very pleasant, good-natured face, a manner which would be described as "jolly" and was plainly well satisfied with herself and her surroundings. She also had a great deal to say, and Forbes got the benefit of it. He did not seem to mind; on the contrary, when he could spare a moment from his plate he laughed and seemed interested; and for one thing, at least, Nell was vaguely thankful to Mrs Boyd—she kept him from going to sleep.

Something else gave her cause for gratitude too—the incessant, merry talk. There was hardly a moment's silence; Brandling, who always said a great deal himself, had the knack of keeping the ball of conversation rolling, and where for a moment it was likely to flag to-night, Nell noticed that Boyd set it going again, quietly but with determination which she alone understood.

"You are very quiet," whispered Nell's neighbour on her right, a middle-aged man with a

SINLESS

kindly face and voice to match. "Are you not well?"

"Not very," she admitted in a whisper too, "but I don't want anyone to know." He nodded, fully comprehending that she wished to be let alone, and signing to one of the servants to refill her glass, himself put into the wine a few small pieces of ice. Nell's eyes thanked him as she sipped it gratefully.

And it was just then that Brandling, who had been talking across the table to Boyd, glanced round and addressed the company generally:

"Talking of long partings, of years elapsing between the parting and meeting of two people," he said, evidently *apropos* of something Nell had not heard, "I think we have at the table to-night the most interesting illustration of that sort of thing which ever came under my personal notice. My two friends here, Mr Forbes and Mr Boyd, were in India for upwards of ten years right off the reel, till about a fortnight ago, neither of them having been home during that time, and neither of them having seen their wives in those ten long years. It struck me when they told me, as being a delightfully uncommon situation. It strikes me now," with a bow and a flatteringly meaning glance into the eyes of first one and then the other of the women on either side of him, "as being positively incomprehensible."

"Is that really so?" inquired Mrs Boyd evidently much pleased at the idea, and searching the deadly white face of her opposite neighbour amusedly. "I hope your husband was more complimentary to you, Mrs Forbes, than mine was to me! He did not know me—actually did not know

SINLESS

me! I suppose," with a fat, jolly laugh, "it's not so surprising, for when he went away I was a little bit of a thing thinner than you; and now they tell me that at any time I shall make a good understudy for Miss Connie Ediss! You know he got hung up in London on the night of his arrival—it's no use frowning, Ken," she added, looking down the line of faces at her husband, "I must tell this little joke against myself—he hates being reminded of it for some extraordinary reason, and as I always say, I'm sure he need not if I don't—well, he got hung up as I said; there was a horrible fog—I was to meet him in town, but the fog was thick at Wimbledon, where we live you know, and I knew it would be worse farther up the line, so did not budge. And the next day when it was quite afternoon and I could not imagine what he was playing at, and begun to get a bit nervous, I thought I'd take a walk to the station and see a few trains come in. Sure enough out of one of them walks my lord, looking as lugubrious as a—as I don't know what, and not casting an eye one way or another; and I stood by the barrier laughing to myself and thinking what a start I'd give him. But he came right through, looking on the ground, and when I put out my hand and said something to him he raised his hat and said 'I beg your pardon, madam, you are mistaken——'"

"You must take this little story of my wife's with a grain of salt," broke in Boyd, striving vainly to keep the vexation out of his voice, and not daring to look up in Nell's direction. "The lights were not lit, and I had not expected her there—and for a moment I should have passed her——"

SINLESS

Brandling was laughing, and Mrs Boyd was guilty of bestowing upon Nell a delighted and most unladylike wink.

"By the way, how did you fellows manage?" inquired Brandling, who had a maddening habit of wanting to get to the root of everything. "I left them, you know, at Charing Cross, Forby huddled up in the refreshment-room, vowing he would not dream of moving, and Boyd fighting his way round the station and getting horribly sat upon by no end of ladies."

"I stayed huddled up," said Forbes with his mouth full, "but my wife did not show the common sense that you did, Mrs Boyd. She came up to meet me, and had to stop in her hotel for her pains, and sat up half the night sending messages across to the station—that was what you did, wasn't it, Ellen?"

He asked the question with his head a little on one side, and with a confident, rather pleased air. He liked to feel and to be reminded that attention had been bestowed upon him, though he had no wish to reciprocate in any way. But he got no answer. All eyes were at last turned upon his wife, everybody remembered for the first time that she had not been heard to make a single remark; something amusing was evidently expected of her now. And Nell looked back at them all with wild eyes like a poor trapped creature at bay; her fingers, lying idly round the stem of her glass, closed on it now in a vice-like grip that shattered it and set the broken pieces deep down into her flesh.

"I—I—am afraid I have cut my hand," she said

SINLESS

with a helpless, foolish little laugh that was half a sob, "I——"

Then suddenly there was a general stir; Boyd, unconscious of what he did, remembering only that he had looked into her face at last and seen on it the pallor of death, came quietly but quickly round the table as Nell got up. At the next clock-tick she was lying unconscious in Brandling's arms.

"It is not a bad cut," said the man who had been sitting next to her. "Mrs Forbes had been feeling unwell all the evening, she told me so."

"Poor little thing!" exclaimed Mrs Boyd. "I thought she was very white. "Bring her out in the hall and leave her to us," she added as Lady Brandling and Mrs Bemister followed hurriedly.

"When women faint at the least little thing, you may depend upon it," declared Forbes, coming out of half-a-dozen "winks" which he had contrived to snatch unnoticed by anybody, "that they are too tightly laced."

SINLESS

CHAPTER X

WHEN Nell recovered she was still in the hall. Someone had drawn a sofa near to the fire, and she was lying upon that, her head propped up by cushions, and her wounded hand bound up in a handkerchief. Mrs Boyd was dabbing eau-de-cologne on her forehead, and little Mrs Bemister, for no particular or sensible reason, was rubbing the insteps of both Nell's little feet.

"There, that's better," declared Mrs Boyd cheerfully, "I begun to think you were never coming round, and I was just going to send for a doctor!" There was a good-natured smile on her lips and in what one could see of her eyes, and she patted Nell's hand gently as she spoke, a friendly little piece of attention from which the recipient recoiled half-unconsciously.

She had come back to life, and, alas! to memory, to find Boyd's wife bending kindly over her, to hear the voice of Boyd's wife chattering cheerful words of comfort in her ears, to feel the touch of her soft plump hands gently pushing back the loose wavy bits of hair from her forehead.

Nell needed no other restorative. With a smothered murmur which none of her hearers understood she drew herself quickly into a sitting posture.

"I am so sorry—I have given you all so much trouble!" she said nervously.

SINLESS

"I wish, only, that you had told us you were not well, my child," returned Lady Brandling, smiling down on her. "I thought you looked the bonniest creature alive when we came in to dinner. And your hand? Is it painful?"

"It is nothing—I have been very silly; pray forgive me!" Every word came with difficulty. She wished they would leave her alone; she wished that Lady Brandling would send her to bed. The air, even in this wide hall, stifled her; though she shivered with cold the flame from the great burning logs seemed to scorch her; she thought that they must all be able to hear the beating of her heart and to read her every thought. And while she answered their many questions with a little smile that she knew herself was foolish and vacant, the men all came out of the dining-room and straight over to her sofa.

Brandling bent over her solicitously.

"You are better?" he said gladly. "Look, I have brought you this," holding out a small tumbler full of champagne. "You had nothing all through dinner but some bits of chipped ice! Your neighbour betrayed you!"—laughing—"I don't wonder you fainted. Now drink this."

Nell smiled up into his handsome, anxious young face. She was grateful for his busy chatter, grateful because he stood between her and all the rest, and so gave her a little time to make up her mind what she should do next. That, however, was decided for her, and by Mrs Boyd, whose tongue never was still for very long.

"Somebody said bridge," she declared, beaming

SINLESS

with delight. "I forget who, but whoever it was I love them—oh, *was* it you, Captain Brandling? At the mention of cards I forget my very name; but Ken hates them—don't you Kenyon? He does, whether he says so or not," addressing the company genially and generally. "Come and amuse Mrs Forbes, Ken, whilst we gamble."

Nell made a wild effort to speak, to say something which would convey to them all that she would rather be alone; but not a word would come, and while she was silent the matter was decided for her.

"One of Ellen's peculiarities is a dislike for cards," Forbes said, pinning his shoulder shawl round him with a large pebble brooch which he was not in the least ashamed to wear. "It's a point on which we don't agree. I share Mrs Boyd's taste; and I certainly think bridge one of the very few modern improvements to be commended. It's about the only thing I know that will keep me from going to sleep." With which remark he pulled up a corner of his shawl to give Mrs Boyd his arm, and piloted her into the drawing-room, the rest following a little amusedly and very willingly.

"I believe I'm a gambler at heart, too, my dear," laughed Lady Brandling, stooping to pat Nell's white cheek. "Come, Mr Boyd, see if you can bring the roses back to this child's face. When you are tired of each other come and talk to us."

Then she left them; and as the last bit of her gown disappeared into the room beyond, as the door closed, and the heavy curtains fell behind her, Boyd came and stood by the fireplace.

He did not speak, but Nell felt that his eyes were

SINLESS

fastened on her bent head, on the flame of red that spread from her bare throat to the roots of her hair. She knew that their minds had travelled back together to another night, only little more than a dozen nights ago, to their first meeting; she felt powerless to keep her head bent, compelled to lift it and meet his eyes.

"Poor little girl!" he said, only just loud enough for her to hear. "Fate has still a grudge against us—Nell!" As she looked round quickly, as she half rose and put out one hand as though to beg his silence, he leant forward and took the cold fingers firmly in his.

"We are quite alone," he said.

"Don't—don't speak here——"

"We are alone," he repeated, "but——" and still keeping her hand in his, he led her across the hall, through the open door of the morning-room.

She breathed more freely when he closed it, when, in the light that was only given by the flaming logs, she stood facing him, and knew that there were no other eyes to watch her.

"Poor little girl!" he said again, putting her back into a big chair in the shadow, and standing with his arm resting on the back of it at her side.

"Can't you—can't you go away?" she said at last, when the silence grew unbearable. "Didn't you have any idea that I—we—were here?"

"Not the remotest! It is the very last thing I should ever have dreamed of. I made so sure—so perfectly sure that we should never meet again; I should never have thought to hesitate about going to any house. I don't know why, because of course

SINLESS

people do meet in the most unexpected as well in the most unlikely places."

"It does not matter what has led to this," she returned desperately, "what accident or fatality—can't you put an end to it? You are the man—you can do as you please—I cannot! I could not leave without bringing no end of questions and much wrath upon myself. You're not going to stay in the house——"

"God forbid!" No pen can describe the mingled passion and horror and relief that rung out in the two simple words.

"—You are only in the neighbourhood! Then you can go to-night, to-morrow, but soon!"

It seemed to her that he hesitated, that his reply was very long in coming; and she got up and stood before him, with one hand resting on the mantelpiece and the other pressed hard down on her breast just above her heart.

"Why are you silent——? You can't mean that you won't go?"

"It is not a question of 'won't'—it is simply that I may find it quite as difficult to leave as would you. Believe me I—I will do my utmost; but you must not blame me," with a faint mirthless smile, "if it is not, as you suggest, to-night, or to-morrow. I can contrive, at all events, that we do not meet again."

"But you cannot," she broke in swiftly. "And—and I could not endure it! Do you think I could bear to know you were watching me, my life—do you think I could bear to watch yours. Oh, it is horrible, it is beyond all endurance—it will kill

SINLESS

me! Is it that it is not so dreadful to you?" sobbingly. "Is it because you are a man——"

"Hush—hush! Don't grieve so! God knows I would not willingly bring you another moment's pain! Don't imagine that I am not heeding you, because I am silent. If you understood, with suppressed passion, "you would know that I dare not trust myself to speak without consideration—I've got to weigh every word, lest I should say those that are clamouring for utterance in my heart. Don't shrink away from me as though you were afraid; I am not going to touch you. I am only telling you the truth—to you alone it is left to me to be honest—to all others I must play a part and act a lie! You guess rightly—this meeting is not so dreadful to me as to you; it is not so frightfully, miserably painful as, a few hours ago, I should have declared it would be.

"Don't think I am lessening the gravity, the dangers of it, because I say this. I am telling you because it is the simple truth—the truth that came to me at that moment when I saw you standing in the drawing-room—the truth that has been troubling me ever since. When—on that day when we parted, I thought—and, as God is my witness, hoped, that we should never meet again—I saw you leave me with the feeling that life itself was going from me; and I started forth to go through my barren existence, to take up, instead of life, a living death, with every intention of fighting through it with my best, most honest endeavours. From the very start I knew I was being worsted in the fight; I knew that no matter into what life I plunged, not

SINLESS

even the relief of momentary forgetfulness would be mine—the sort of forgetfulness that every man can command for the time. I knew that I must look on all the world, and all the women in it with passionless eyes ; I knew that the sun could never shine in my heart, and the hues of the earth must always be dull greys for me ; that everything must be a weariness, and nothing a joy, just because so long as I should live one woman, lost to me, would never release my soul. And do you know what the result of that knowledge that grew upon me with every passing hour, was ? It was to rouse within me a craving for the sight of your face again, the sound of your voice. Oh, if any one had come to me and said—‘Go yonder and you may see her, hear her, speak with her,’ I should not have gone ; I should have fled from the temptation as from hell. The craving might be there, but I should never voluntarily have satisfied it. And I came here to-night, and we met once more—and the truth was revealed to me in that moment of our meeting. I was not sorry—I would not have had a moment changed — I was glad, oh, my God ! mad with gladness ! I would not have avoided you then if I could have done so. I lived again ; and I knew as I know now, that I have neither the power nor the will to fight Fate any more ! ”

Every word left his lips slowly, distinctly, quite simply. They sunk deep into the woman’s heart and filled her with a new unthought of dread. She was still standing before him, looking straight into his eyes, reading there the terrible restraint he was

SINLESS

putting upon himself, gathering all her courage, and well knowing that it was so little.

“Does that mean that you will not go?—Does it mean that——?” Her quick, breathless questions were cut short by the abrupt entrance of young Brandling. Each had the presence of mind not to stir; Nell gave a little laugh that might have been at something her companion had said, and Boyd rested easily against the chair back. Brandling came up to them in his breezy, good-natured way.

“We are all pining for you both,” he said with his handsome eyes fixed on Nell. “Forby is getting thoroughly fidgetty now that you are out of his sight, Mrs Forbes—he says you are the only person who knows which kind of acid drops he sucks in the evenings. His man has hunted through Forby’s room, and now will you let Marie search yours? And meantime do come into the drawing-room and bear us company, both of you.”

Brandling was still smiling happily at the thought of Forbes’s missing sweets; Nell’s colour had risen with mingled relief at the opportunity of escape, and disgust at the memory of the exhibition her husband generally made of himself over these special evening acid drops; and Boyd, unnoticed by either, had seemed to snatch at every word Brandling was saying, just as if they were important, valuable words, and not mere half nonsense.

“They are in the little bag that I expect got put in my room by mistake,” Nell said quickly, “I’ll go up for them myself.”

“And you will come down again?” said Brandling, holding the door open for her.

SINLESS

"Surely." Both men followed her into the hall, both watched her as she ran lightly up the great staircase.

"A case of Beauty and the Beast if you like, there," declared the captain, in an undertone. "I wanted you to meet Forby's wife—I can tell you, when I first came upon her at Bray, and discovered who she was, you could have knocked me down with half the proverbial feather. She's the loveliest thing I've seen for many a year—and buried in a place like Bray with that old horror for sole companion! He seems game to stay here anyhow; and your wife tells me that you are both remaining for some time with her mother. Between us we ought to be able to make it lively for the little girl! I'll tell you what it is, Boyd," suddenly wheeling round and searching his companion's rather pale face, "I've never known you to be so silent in my life——"

"My dear chap, everyone is silent when you start talking!" returned Boyd with a laugh, and seeming to come to life suddenly. "Shall we go and see what the bridge players are doing?" And they went; and Boyd answered several questions about Mrs Forbes quite correctly, and was persuaded to join the players. And all the time something his host had said in the morning-room kept recurring to him, rendering it difficult to him to follow the remarks which were passing; while above every word, above everything, there came with foolish, exasperating persistence, upon his ears the echo of one particular sentence—"Between us we ought to be able to make it lively for the little girl!"

When Nell returned to the drawing-room she

SINLESS

seemed to have completely recovered ; she bore the general inquiries well, she was evidently greatly amused by many little things her host said to her, and she conducted the delivery of Forbes's acid drops, and silenced his grumblings with good humour and tact that gained her admiration from all. She never once looked in Boyd's direction, and she took a low chair as close to Lady Brandling's side as possible.

The time passed happily enough for most ; and the party broke up at a fairly early hour, because the guests had some distance to go, and a message had been brought by Boyd's man that the heavy snow-storm had made the roads in a lamentable condition, and Lady Brandling declared that Nell was looking tired out.

They all assembled in the hall—one of the most attractive parts of the house—to speed the parting guests. There was a good deal of rumbling and snorting on the part of motor-cars outside, a good deal of muffling up and shivering on the part of the women who were to start out on a cold journey home, and there were many encouraging remarks from Forbes, who had remained out of his so-called bed later than he had ever done since his return to England, and who was chuckling delightedly at the thought of his neighbours' discomfort, and his own comfort.

"I don't envy you !" he said generally, "going back in motors, too ! The invention of the devil—of the devil, madam," addressing his hostess, who was of his opinion but who might not have expressed herself so strongly. "Keep out of the

SINLESS

draught, Ellen—you'll be having toothache to-morrow——”

“I never had it in my life,” said Nell lightly, “but Lady Brandling is sending me to bed before everybody goes. I confess to being a little tired, and so I will say good-night.”

She held out her hand to each of the women in turn, and then to the men. Upon him who had been her neighbour at dinner, she smiled sweetly.

“I shan't forget how you helped me through,” she said softly. Everybody was chatting and laughing; the servants were handing round mulled wine; Forbes was brewing himself some hot whiskey and water, and squeezing lemon into it with much relish and a great deal of noise made with his mouth; his wife was by no means the centre of attraction as she got through her farewells rapidly. Now, her host was bending over her pretty injured hand, holding it lightly but impressively to his lips, and murmuring something very pleasant and obviously sincere about his delight in welcoming her to his home; now, there were only her husband and Boyd left to whom she had to say good-night.

She looked round in search of them both; with a little throb of relief she saw that they were gone—she might get away without speaking to either. But Lady Brandling detained her a moment, and in that moment she saw that Boyd and Forbes were returning to the hall from the direction of her husband's rooms.

“Just been having a bit of a chat about the old place,” he said, meaning India, and hugging his shawls tightly round him with a shiver, “and

SINLESS

showing Mr Boyd how well our host is doing me ! They're rattling rooms—you must look at them to-morrow, Ellen : you'll be able to improve mine at home on the pattern of these. Off to bed ! eh ? Good-night." He nodded over the rim of his glass that he had been carrying about with him ; and Nell, with a little bow to Boyd, and her eyes on the carpet, turned quickly and ran upstairs. And as she did so, Forbes went over to the fire, and Boyd snatched her handkerchief from the hands of a servant who had just picked it up.

"Your handkerchief, Mrs Forbes," he said for the benefit of the company who neither saw nor heard him ; and was on the upper landing as soon as she. A wide curtained arch hid them from view ; the man seized her hands in a grip that brought a little cry to her lips.

"I have been mad with one thought," he whispered over her breathlessly, while his eyes that burned down into hers said far more than the hasty words, while in them she read passionate satisfaction too great, too madly glad for speech, "and I have lived in the hell of that torture, since we parted, without reason."

Then he dropped her hands, and went down the stairs again ; and Nell stumbled on blindly to her room,

SINLESS

CHAPTER XI

WE are told that there is nothing to which one cannot get used. Nell had been told the same thing often, and she had heard that it was so with, perhaps, a little smile of disbelief; but she would not have smiled disbelievingly to-day—she would have admitted that there was a great deal more in use, in habit, than she had ever dreamed.

It was now two months since she had re-entered her pretty home at Bray to find her husband, muffled up in shawls, awaiting her on the hall hearth; since she had come out of an exquisite love dream into a hideous nightmare, since she had awakened to the knowledge that she was but a shuttlecock that Fate had determined to toss about on a merciless battledore at will.

And she had grown almost used to the treatment.

Five weeks out of those two months had been already spent beneath Lady Brandling's roof—five weeks of such mingled pleasure and pain, joy and misery, happiness and perfect torture, that they would hardly bear looking back upon. And yet she had grown used to the life that she and her fellows led.

There was nothing for the amusement, the entertainment, the complete comfort of her guests, of which Lady Brandling or her son did not think; and

SINLESS

it would have been a fastidious person indeed who could have discovered aught to cavil with in the life at Hedlam.

The Forbes, out of all the large house-party, had alone been persuaded to remain, and at the end of the fourth week had found themselves the only guests.

This arrangement was not without its charm; there was something so delightfully homelike, yet so deliciously luxurious about this charming home that appealed to one equally, whether one visited it with a huge party or quite alone.

Nell was not sure if she liked best the freedom of belonging to so large a gathering that she could rarely be missed, or idling through the days practically by herself. In both cases she had found any amount of opportunities for indulging in solitude—in long lonely walks, in equally lonely rides, in hours spent alone in her pretty rooms.

At the beginning of her visit, when she had first set eyes upon the one man above all others whom she had prayed might never cross her path, she had decided that something, anything, must be made to happen which would necessitate her instant departure from Hedlam: but she had found that there was nothing which would serve her as excuse. There was no little obstacle to her continuing her visit which her kind host and hostess could not combat; there was no help to be gained from Forbes, because he seemed quite content, and quite ready to remain as long as his friends chose to have him.

He did not attempt to disguise the fact that he found this place in every way preferable to his own

SINLESS

home, that Nell succeeded in rather getting on his nerves, and that, as he had neither power nor inclination to seek society, he was very willing to allow society to seek him.

And Nell had realised that it was hopeless to think of escape, and had depended with feverish anxiety upon Boyd's departure.

Here Nell had met with fresh disappointment. The days sped by and still the Boyds remained in the neighbourhood. Mrs Boyd and her mother determined that the visit should be a long one, and he, who had been absent from his home and his country for ten long years, was powerless to make any reasonable excuse for leaving either the one or the other again.

And Nell had grown used to the knowledge that he was living within a six miles drive of Hedlam ; she had grown used to seeing him once or twice in every week ; used to his dining with the Brandlings ; used to his joining the shooting parties ; used to seeing him in one or other of the little villages as she drove through them.

She could give him cool friendly greeting, she could let him hold her hand for the shortest of minutes, now, without that scorching flood of colour that at first had spread over her face at the mere sound of his voice. She could sit next to him at the table without fainting, and she could seem to find the amusement and the pleasure in his society that she found in that of any who came beneath Lady Brandling's hospitable roof.

Nell had learned many things in these few weeks—among them the art of self-control ; she had

SINLESS

learned how to prevent that which was in her heart from showing itself in her eyes ; and she had learned the value of continual occupation, continual amusement, as barriers to disturbing thoughts. These she had learned for her own good, for her own momentary comfort and partial happiness.

But she had learned other things too, and one of them was the utter, hopeless misery of Boyd's life—hopelessness and misery that had nothing to say to his unfortunate meeting with herself, that was accentuated by it, but that would have been there in any case.

It was plain to all who knew Boyd and his wife, plain to those not possessed of the anxious, unconsciously ever-watchful eyes of which, to her cost, Nell was possessed. Never were two people in all the great world more utterly unsuited to each other than Boyd and his wife ; never were all the tastes, all the ideas, all the likes and dislikes of any couple more completely at variance.

And strangely enough, it was their very indifference to each other—indifference veiled, hidden, kept so well in the background that never sign of it escaped either—which made Boyd's life just bearable, and hers as easy and sunny and happy as it had been all through the years in which she had lived very comfortably without him.

Mrs Boyd was what is called a nice woman ; she would also have been called a good woman, and there could not be a doubt that she was both. She was an admirable house-keeper of the strictly middle-class type—the sort of house-keeper who ordered breakfast at eight o'clock, and was in the dining-

SINLESS

room, with a tight-fitting dress on and a high linen collar, ready to eat it at five minutes to.

She kept her servants strictly in order, and spent most of her life watching them. She had a very pretty house of the villa type in Wimbledon, and she visited and was visited by all the neighbours. Every Thursday, when she was "at home," she sipped tea with these neighbours, and talked the latest mild scandal, the sewing-class, and dress. She sometimes took part in a local concert, attended all the bazaars, and went to church, certainly once every Sunday. She had already awakened to the fact that she understood her husband not at all, but she was not going to admit it even to herself.

To-day, while Lady Brandling and Nell were sitting cosily over their tea and listening to the chatter of Mrs Bemister, who had come to bid them farewell, Mrs Boyd became the subject of conversation.

"I hardly know what to make of either of them," declared the visitor, glancing over the rim of her cup at first Nell, who was busily picking up stitches in a sock Lady Brandling was knitting, and then at her hostess, who answered :

"Why?"

Mrs Bemister shrugged her slight shoulders.

"It is difficult to explain. They seem so amusingly unsuited. Do—do you like her—Mrs Boyd?"

"I have really seen very little of her—I like her husband immensely," Lady Brandling returned.

"Do you, Mrs Forbes?" A long pause, and Nell counting half aloud—"One, two, three—I beg your

SINLESS

pardon," she added, "I was afraid of losing count." But Mrs Bemister had only been feeling her way, and she did not wait for an answer to her question. She knew she might speak almost without reserve.

"Well, she's quite a nice little woman, but she ought to have been married to almost anyone else——"

"That is the sort of thing which can be said of nine-tenths of one's friends," declared Lady Brandling with a little laugh, "in these days at all events. I understand that Mrs Boyd is a splendid house-keeper, and really a marvel with the servants, and I'm sure she is a woman who, if she had had children, would have brought them up on the good old lines——"

"But she wouldn't have been able to get through an ordinary doorway! What a little tub it is! We have seen a great deal of them, at least her, you know, and—why, you're not going, are you, Mrs Forbes?"

Nell had risen suddenly, and had gone over to the window. She had grown used to almost everything, but something told her to escape before she heard any more that Mrs Bemister had to say.

"If Lady Brandling will excuse me."

The old lady patted Nell's little hand as she passed, and when the door had closed behind her, Mrs Bemister made a wry face.

"Didn't she like what I said?" she inquired.

"I don't know. But when it comes to a question of unsuitable marriages—well, I fancy, poor child, she is painfully reminded of her own."

"Of course! How stupid of me! I'd actually

SINLESS

forgotten all about—him ! And I said something about a tub, too—so stupid of me.” And then she dismissed the subject airily.

Meantime Nell was speeding across the shadowy gardens in the direction of the high road. The shooting party had not yet returned, and she did not want to meet Brandling, because he might insist on accompanying her in her walk now that it was growing dusk.

She slipped through the lodge-gates, and down a side road which led to the village. The blood was tingling in her veins, the colour which Mrs Bemister’s words had brought into her cheeks, still burned there.

“ I thought I didn’t mind what anyone said—I thought I did not mind anything ! ” she said to herself resentfully, “ but I begin to think I am mistaken in myself. Oh, why did I stay here—why did I not force Kenneth to take me home again at once ? Why—— ? ” She had addressed her questions half-aloud to the roughly swaying trees ; and now she quickened her pace, and laughed, half aloud, too, at the folly of addressing the questions to anything.

She had been continually realising afresh her utter helplessness, she had believed herself grown used to it as she had grown used to so many things ; but now, all at once, it seemed to her that she must rebel—rebel openly.

She had been quiet, so foolishly quiet, for so long ; she had allowed herself to hope—for what ? The question presenting itself suddenly, she stopped dead in her hasty walk, looking outward over the stretch of dim, dreary country, as dim and dreary as all her

SINLESS

life must be, now ; stopped and stretched out her hands as though to ward off some evil ; stopped, with a little sob catching in her throat, with a wild glance round, like some creature at bay, hunted, haunted, her own thoughts the hunters, her heart's secret the ghost that rose up in her path always, that put out its cold, ruthless hand to rob her of peace of mind.

In the dim light hovering between the dead day and the coming night, in the shadow of the great gaunt trees, with the sighing wind moaning dimly in her ears, Nell looked out on the scenery about her with the eyes of a woman who sees no hope anywhere, with the growing agony and fear that might be felt by one chained to a rock, left to the mercy of the waves that were creeping nearer and ever nearer, washing only now over her feet, but as they rose higher, telling the victim, with their steady, triumphant roar, that presently they would close over her head without pity.

There was no sound save that made by the wind ; there was not a human thing near her. Down in the hollow, the lights of the little village twinkled uncertainly.

On her right was a road to that village ; and she turned away from the sight, from the thought of going where there would be people to look at and speak with her, with a shudder. On her left was the opening of a great wood that formed part of the Hedlam property ; and Nell turned towards it instinctively, as a poor wounded animal drags itself to some hidden corner to bear its misery and its pain alone.

SINGLESS

For the first time in her life she felt fatigue that threatened momentarily to overpower her; her breath came in little short gasps; her heart beat and her head throbbed as they beat and throb after a long run. A little faint, sickly feeling crept over her; and instinctively she sought the support of a slender tree. There at its root was the trunk of one that had fallen and that had been shaped into a sort of rough log bench. Nell sat down upon it gladly, unfastening the collar of her fur coat as though its soft pressure choked her, and letting her head fall back till it rested against a support of rough knotted bark.

A bird, startled, rustled in the leaves above her; once some soft, live thing touched her foot, and sped onward in fear of her. But Nell did not heed. She was saying to herself: "What can I—what shall I do?" not as she had said it often before, but in sheer desperation, in the sudden knowledge that there was escape for her nowhere.

When nearly half an hour had passed and the crunching of fallen leaves behind her told her that some one, some human thing, was near, she did not move, or open her eyes. The loneliness, the darkness of the place held no terrors for her; and when the disturber of her solitude came close and then to a sudden, surprised halt in front of her, she still remained with her head against one tree, and her weak body resting gratefully on the other. But her eyes opened and looked, through the dim light, straight up into Boyd's.

"Are you ill? Has anything happened? Good Heavens! what are you doing here—at this hour—

SINLESS

in this place ? ” he said sharply, divided between wonder, wild joy at seeing her, and still fear for her. “ Nell, speak to me.”

She looked back at him in a little blank way that frightened him, and that made him stoop forward to take one of her hands into his clasp. She showed no sort of surprise at his presence, no resentment at his touch ; she even smiled back into his anxious face. And he noticed that for one moment her fingers clung in their hold upon his hand.

“ Speak to me,” he said again. “ Something is wrong——”

“ *Something !* ” The one word, uttered without bitterness, but with such miserable emphasis, gave him answer enough.

“ You must tell me,” he declared swiftly, coming nearer ; and putting one knee on the tree trunk which formed her resting place, bent down to search her face in the misty dusk. In all the world they might have been utterly alone. “ You must tell me,” he said again. “ I—say what you will——” passionately, “ I, who brought into your life all—the only misery, it has ever known, have a right to know——”

As she drew her fingers from his hold, then, and turned sharply away, he noticed, suddenly, that her coat was undone, that beneath it her throat and a little of her neck was bare. The wind, bitterly cold, blew roughly against the soft, uncovered flesh.

“ Do you want to catch your death of cold ? ” he said half angrily, with miserable anxiety in every tone ; and drew the furs closer about her, and with

SINLESS

gentle fingers fumbled clumsily with the fastenings. "Are you trying to kill yourself? Nell, is life too hard after all—is it quite unbearable? I knew it would be—I knew it must—for you as for me. Nell, do you know that this is the first time, since we met in Brandling's house, that you and I have had one moment alone? Yes, you do know it—you know it well because you have taken such care that it should be so! And I have watched you! I thought once that I could not look on at your life, that I could not watch your heart breaking—I thought—you remember that night—that when the time came for me to leave you, when the time came to leave you with him—my God! I thought I should have to kill you! I was not sane—I'd forgotten every one in the house, in the world, but you! I only knew that you were mine—that you belonged to me—and that . . . and then you went away from us all—*all*—up the stairs, and I followed you, with your handkerchief that you had dropped—and—and—the madness that was in me died down—I was sane again. Darling——"

She drew farther from him; he saw her eyes widen with fear, and he heard her breath coming quickly, unevenly.

"What does it matter?" he went on swiftly. "Why should I seek to hide it from you? Why may I not say aloud the words that are ringing in my heart day and night? Oh, God! such hideous days and nights—I told you so then—and I tell you so again. You *are* my darling—you are my whole life! Do you expect me to say I am sorry for this meeting, sorry that at last I can speak to you and

SINLESS

you can hear me without a dozen ears wide open to catch every word we say? Well, you will be disappointed then! I won't say it—I'm not sorry—I'm glad—*glad!* I had hungered for the sight of you, for the sound of your voice, for the touch of your dear hands, before—I confessed so much—I would not say I was sorry then, why should I now? Well, I have seen you, I have heard your voice; when you could not help yourself you have let me take your hand. And I have not been satisfied. Nell, this must end—it cannot go on! I have cheated myself into the belief that it could, but I knew all the time that it *was* cheating! Why do you look at me like that—with that horror? I am only laying bare my heart to you—to whom alone I can be honest. I told you so that night—I told you that to all others I must act a lie—but I will not act one to you, and I will speak now, because once you are gone out of my sight Heaven knows when. . . . Listen, when I saw you at yonder house that night, when I have met you there since, when I have watched the fight which you were fighting, and the torture of your life, do you know that I have thought sometimes that it would kill you? Do you know that I have been mad with fear; and that I have wanted to take you away from it all, from everyone, right under the eyes of everyone—I have been sorely tempted to hold you here in my arms and to cry aloud to them all that you were mine—mine! You *are* mine,” suddenly reaching down and lifting her shrinking form on to his heart, where she lay helpless, panting, white as death. “You are mine—body and soul, as you never have

SINLESS

been, as you never can be another's ! Say it—say it ! ”

“Are you mad? Have you no pity? Let me go——”

“Say it ! ”

“Let me go—you hurt me——”

“If I kill you, I will hear it from your own lips ! ”

She made him no answer. She strove to press him back from her, to escape from him and the power of his eyes that seemed to search her soul. She fought with all her might against the sense of comfort that the mere sound of his voice, the pressure of his arms brought her, against the longing to turn to him and sob out all the pent-up misery of her heart in the safe shelter of his tender hold.

She fought for mastery over herself, for power to resist him, because she knew that if she yielded but to one moment of the joy that was creeping into her heart he would read in her eyes what, with her lips, she would never gain the courage to tell him.

“Say it,” he whispered again, and all the fierce command had died out of his voice. “You are mine——”

He held her closer still against his breast, he could feel her heart beating heavily against his own ; he gave back the only shy caresses he had ever won from her, in breathless kisses on her lips and eyes, and throbbing throat. In that moment every bitter thing was banished from her mind, in that moment memory was lulled to rest in a trance of sweet forgetfulness that both shared.

In the night-silence and the darkness, that was about them, the world seemed to hold no other thing than their love.

SINLESS

All through their lives they must suffer, he through her and she through him; this one moment of happiness and complete forgetfulness she at least could give him, and she gave it unstintingly, in the answer he sought from her quivering lips that were held, still, close to his.

“What need to say it, when you know?” she asked him softly. “In heart and mind, in thought and act I am yours, and yours alone, surely, irrevocably—in——”

“Go on,” he said breathlessly.

“Oh, more—so much more than you can guess—than you may ever know——” The words that he did not understand, that contented him enough in the tenderness they expressed, died away in a sob, and Nell, pressing her face against his arm, broke down at last into such hopeless, agonised weeping as the man prayed in his heart he might never witness again. She wept as she had never done in all her life, in such uncontrollable agony, such abandonment, such weakness, such passionate grief, that her whole slight frame was rocked and shaken like a leaf in a storm.

And the thought came to him that this was but part of the suffering he must watch her bear, if their lives were to be lived out as they had been lived during the weeks which had elapsed since their first meeting; but part of the suffering he would have to look upon while he stood by, powerless to offer her consolation, though she was the one woman in the world, the woman for whom he would have gladly laid down his life.

SINLESS

CHAPTER XII

IT was many minutes before Nell recovered, before she drew herself from his hold, and with a movement which forbade him to follow her went to a little distance from him.

Her breath still came unevenly, like the breath of a child who has fallen asleep crying, her step was uncertain.

Boyd left her alone for a little while ; he kept silence, also. Every moment the darkness grew deeper ; here in the wood, it was growing intense. Something in it reminded Nell of the hour, perhaps, because she came slowly back to him, presently.

“ It is late—I had forgotten the time. They will miss me, and Captain Brandling is quite capable of heading a search party at a moment’s notice,” she said, with an effort to speak calmly, even lightly. “ I—must get back—you,” quickly, a little fearfully, “ must let me go. And—and—I must say just this to you first. . . . You said just now that—this life could not go on ; you are right. It cannot, if—if—we are to meet again like this. Something of it might have been avoided if only you had gone away as you half promised, as I begged you, from the first moment when you found that I was here. Won’t you ? Won’t you—for my sake ? ”

“ Now ?—to-day——? This very hour——? ”

SINLESS

“ Yes.”

“ Is that what you really mean ? Do you want me to take myself absolutely out of your life—to go where I can be sure of never seeing you, never hearing the sound of your voice ? Do you really mean that you are going to try living this false, this hideous, unbearable life, and that you want me to live mine on the same lines, just because we know it is what the world calls right ? ”

“ I—don’t know why—I cannot go into reasons—I dare not attempt argument,” she returned weakly. “ I only know what must be wisest and best, for you and for me too, I only know what is right and just to—to your wife and my husband—I——”

“ Well, I cannot do it,” declared Boyd, with set lines of determination coming about his mouth. “ I tell you I can’t do it—and I cannot let you ! ”

“ Listen,” he went on, while she turned away with a hopeless gesture, “ we cannot talk here ; and there is a great deal we must say to each other—at least I must say to you. It is late, now, and, as you say, you will be missed—they may commence a search for you. Nell, I may be able to do as you wish—God knows I would not bring you one moment’s suffering more than I have brought you already. I want to do only that which is for your happiness, for your future peace ; but in obeying you when you send me from you, I don’t know that I should be doing that. If—if we had never met again, if either of our lives could have been made barely possible in the lines in which they had been cast, I might have agreed with you ; but as it is I cannot. You are breaking your heart,” passionately,

SINGLESS

"you are ill ! I can see you failing—do you think I can bear that ? "

"Not if you watch it. But if you go away—if you go where you can hear nothing of me——"

"It would be worse ! I couldn't rest—I should have to hear of you. Don't you understand what it is to me to live only for those moments when we meet, when I can look at you across a table, when I can touch your hand, and see your smile, even if it is not for me ? "

"It is madness——"

"Yes, but madness that has the only touch of comfort our lives hold ; madness that I at least live for ; madness that brings one moment of something like content that is worth the torture afterwards ! "

"Then if you won't, I must go. I can't stand it—I dare not ! What is it that you are trying to do ? To break down all my resolve ? To show me more surely every hour that I am pitifully weak after all ? To keep on pointing out to me the way to happiness till I grow mad and reckless and till I let you lead me where you will ? — Oh, I thought you loved me—with a very different love to that which we see every day. It—it was hard—hard enough before you came—are you of all others going to make it harder still for me ? "

"That seems to be my fate," he returned a little bitterly, "I who love you above everything on earth or in heaven. Nell, will you give me a little time to think ? "

"Only to make matters worse—I tell you thought is fatal——"

SINLESS

“But will you? I must let you go now—I dare not detain you. But if I am going to take myself out of your life once and for all, I am not going to leave you like this. Will you give me a little time? Will you see me again—will you meet me somewhere? I may come round to seeing as you do, or to appearing to do so, at any rate, and I may part from you forever, but I swear to you that if I do it shall not be now, and here, at this moment. You say you cannot argue; but I can; and you must, you shall hear me! Will you?”

“If you insist——”

“No, I ask you. If we are never to meet again, surely you cannot grudge me a few hours out of one of your days!”

She hesitated. She was after all only a woman; and a woman who loved him. And all her soul cried out for the love and tenderness that answered hers.

He took her hands and held them close against his heart.

“To-morrow,” he said quickly. “I will drive to the cross-roads, just above Bookham—you know the place? Will you be there? Will it be too far? Can you get away? At two—at three, any hour you like——”

“At three,” she said hastily. “Now let me go.” And snatching her hands out of his, she turned sharply away, and sped down the wood path, and out towards the road, before he was aware of her intention.

Boyd watched her as far as he could; he knew she would be quite safe on that road; his only fear was lest her strength should fail her. And so, with

SINLESS

quick strides, he followed till he could see that she was still hastening on, and that presently she passed through the lodge gates.

Nell managed to slip into the house without being noticed. She was very late, and already those in the house had retired to their rooms to dress for dinner; to-night there was a dinner-party, and presently the guests would begin to arrive.

Marie, faithful and very active, was in Nell's room busily preparing for the toilette, busily putting everything ready, from the little shoes to the tiny amber combs for Nell's hair. She ran down the corridor too, to Lady Brandling's room, and told her that Mrs Forbes had returned, which stopped any inquiry. And Nell hastened through the dressing, and arrived rather late in the drawing-room, with flushed cheeks, and looking, as Brandling told her, more lovely than ever. This was one of her dream nights, one unlike any she had passed since the night of her introduction to Hedlam. She wanted to think and she had not a moment; she was haunted by the folly of the promise she had made Boyd, and haunted by the knowledge that still she wanted to keep that promise. Everybody seemed to talk to her at once, everybody seemed to want an answer at once. Where had she been? What had made her go out on such a miserably cold night? Did she like rambling over the country alone? Was not she afraid?

By-and-by Forbes dragged his attention from his soup plate to address his wife.

"I hope you don't take long to pack up, Ellen," he said.

SINLESS

“To pack up? Why——”

“Mrs Forbes,” broke in Captain Brandling, “be disobedient for this once—declare you won’t go—tell Forby he must take this little journey alone——”

“Whatever are you talking about?” asked Nell, puzzled and a little alarmed.

“We’re going to London—to-morrow morning. I’ve decided. I should have told you about it, but, of course,” with as much resentment as he could crowd into the words with his mouth full, “you were not here to listen. I’m going to London—to see a new doctor——”

“To London! To see a *new* doctor! Why, you haven’t seen one at all yet, have you?” There was surprise and a touch of consternation in her voice that made everyone look at her; and then Nell recollected that there were others at the table beside herself and her husband—a fact that he did not trouble to consider—and blushed crimson as she also remembered that he would probably launch into a discussion that would surely be best left till they were alone. “No, I don’t take long to pack,” she added hastily, and turned to Brandling, who, catching the appeal in her eyes, turned the general attention from Forbes and herself.

“It’s true,” he said to her, in a soft little whisper, when everybody else was talking, and when they were able to indulge in a little conversation, unheard. “Gratwicke dropped in this evening, while you were out—you met him I think?—and he was terribly loud in his praises of a young doctor who has just come under his notice. Quite young, but marvellously clever. It appears,” lowering the whisper

SINLESS

to almost a breath—"that he pulled a chap round with all the dread complaints that poor old Forby thinks he's got, and a few others thrown in! Set him up for another forty years, more or less, and altogether made a cure that will in turn make *his* name. Gratwicke grew positively eloquent—Forby literally drank in every word; and I tell you, Mrs Forbes, he came near to dancing with delight! Result—orders for remove to town to-morrow; if you agree, result two will be a broken heart for me!"

"How silly you are!" said Nell, chiefly because Brandling's information nearly took her breath away, and she felt incapable of making any other answer.

The dinner seemed endless to-night, the hours, afterwards in the drawing-room, to pass on leaden wings. The guests were old, and unamusing, and slow to go. Forbes slept in snatches, and sometimes snored. Brandling devoted himself to Nell, and Nell listened dreamily and flatteringly, and kept her eyes furtively on the clock.

Contrary to custom, when she had bidden Lady Brandling and Brandling good-night, she followed her husband to his room.

"I want a few minutes with you," she said, with a glance towards the next room, where she knew Forbes' man was waiting. "Send Worth away."

Forbes grunted, but obeyed; and Nell took a few steps up and down the hearth-rug.

"It's about what you said at dinner—about some doctor——"

"*Some* doctor," repeated Forbes. "The coming doctor!—if all accounts be true, a man who will

SINLESS

startle the world ! I'm not much of a believer in doctors as you know, but one can't blink facts ; and Gratwicke, who's one of the cleverest and best known doctors of our time, swears by this new man. His name's Oswald—Owen Oswald—ever heard of him ? ”

“ Never. Do you mean that you want to consult him about yourself ? ”

“ Not only want, but intend to. Gratwicke tells me that he is only going to be in town for a week, just now, as he has some wonderful case on in Scotland, where he is going to stay at the house of the patient—it's a case that will add no end of honours to those he has already won.”

“ What's his speciality ? Rheumatism, liver, bronchitis ? I should have thought they might have been grappled with by the ordinary practitioner here or at Bray.”

“ I don't remember,” observed Forbes with some offended dignity, “ having asked your opinion. Mine is a special case, the details of which I am aware you take no very great interest in. I talked them over with Gratwicke, however, and he advises me strongly to see this man Oswald. You appear to be on the point of putting forth objections, Ellen——”

“ Not at all. I merely thought such sudden determination—odd. It's rather a hasty way to leave here, isn't it ? after all Lady Bran——”

“ That is an affair which I have settled—in the circumstances they quite understand my haste.”

“ But—but——” said Nell, looking down at her shoes now and struggling to keep the anxiety out of her voice, “ is it necessary for me—to go too ? ”

SINLESS

Forbes threw back the edge of his shawl that had been wrapped closely round his chest, as though in an endeavour to draw breath with more ease.

"Necessary!" he repeated with amazement. "Necessary! Are you aware what you are saying, Ellen? Have you forgotten that you are my wife?"

Forgotten! Nell, in her present agitated state of mind, nearly laughed aloud.

"You have Worth," she submitted, "I—I—hate town."

"Which is unfortunate. Pass me that spoon, please. Gratwicke says that I could not have been doing a worse thing than taking glycerine—he says honey and whiskey are admirable together, and relieve the chest far more rapidly. I can't get any honey here. There's a place——"

Nell made an impatient gesture which silenced him:

"You can get tons of it in jars at any time of the year. But what about to-morrow?"

"We leave about noon——"

"Then I for one can do no such thing—I simply could not be ready."

"There is not another good train till late in the afternoon."

"Then it will have to be that or none." Forbes had never heard his wife speak with so much determination, with so much curbed anger in her voice. He stared at her hard for several moments; and he noticed for the first time that her face was unusually pale, that the pretty rounded cheeks were hollowing a little, that there were purplish rings beneath the lovely eyes.

SINLESS

"You don't look over well yourself," he remarked grudgingly, "white and pasty; and you're irritable too! I'll tell you what it is—I'll get this man Oswald to have a look at you too, and tell me what——"

"If you dare to mention my name to him—if—" began Nell, turning upon her husband with such sudden passion that for a moment he thought she had gone mad. And the hot blood rushed into her face to stay there, to keep riveted upon it Forbes' sharp, merciless eyes. "I—I—mean that I am quite well and that I have not the remotest intention of being bothered with a doctor, even if you choose to be." Then without another word, without waiting for any more information about the morrow, she turned her back upon her husband and went out of the room.

"Mad!" was Forbes' inward comment. "I used to think she was inclined to be hysterical, but now I'm certain she is mad. I shall have to be a good deal more firm with her—I've been too easy. And, by Jove! she *has* changed lately! I was half afraid this visit would somewhat spoil her, and it has! Not a bad thing it's coming to an end."

Forbes settled himself comfortably, and waited for Worth; in five minutes he had forgotten Nell, and everything else except his own immediate needs.

His wife snatched up a Bradshaw from a corner in the hall, and went hastily to her room to search through it for the only good train to London after mid-day.

It was one which did not leave so late as her husband would have made her believe; but still one

SINGLESS

which put aside even the bare possibility of her keeping her promise to Boyd. She could not see him—there was mingled bitter disappointment and keen relief in the thought—but she must find some means of telling him so, by a message, by a letter, in any way. But she could not let him think she had purposely, deliberately broken her word; she would not force upon him the conviction that she was afraid to keep it. She must let him know—but how? She could not send a message openly by any of the servants, because there was no earthly reason why she should let him hear of her departure, why she should give the information to a man who was a mere acquaintance. She feared to send it secretly. It would not be possible even to snatch the time to meet him and tell him herself.

While she had been thinking, she had thrown aside her gown; and now she wrapped a thick morning-gown round her and thrust her feet into soft slippers.

There was only one thing for it, she must write, and she must slip down to the house letter-box. With any luck, and fairly decent postal arrangements locally, Boyd would get the letter early in the afternoon.

She wrote nothing but the bare information that she was leaving for town next day, sealed and addressed the letter, and slipped it among the folds of her wrapper.

Then she opened the door a little way, and waited till she saw, by the absence of light, that everybody had gone to bed. Brandling slept at the other end of the long passage leading to the right from her

SINLESS

room ; Lady Brandling not quite so far off. Nell had heard both doors close long ago, and now she ventured to creep out from her own room.

There was no light ; there was not even a moon to shine in at the long hall windows. She could just distinguish the marble busts of some of the Brandlings which stood in alcoves all down the huge staircase, looking cold and ghostly among the dark walls and darker picture frames. She could hear the clock ticking loudly and evenly in the hall below ; as she leant for a moment over the gallery rail, she could hear that no living soul was about.

She felt guilty, and she knew that if she met anyone she would appear guilty. But the lower hall was reached, crossed softly ; the dogs paid no heed to her save by a gentle, welcoming flapping of their tails. A moment more and she would have reached the box. A slight sound behind her made her start, and with difficulty keep back a little cry of alarm. There was no one to be seen ; only the sound of a heavy breath to be heard. Nell dropped her letter into the box, groped her way back to the stairs, and then, with her heart beating so that she could hear no other sound, she fled back to her room.

“ It wasn’t anyone ! It must have been one of the dogs—what a fool I am ! ” she said to herself, shutting her door and sinking into her chair by the fire.

And downstairs Forbes was creeping cautiously back to his chair.

“ Ellen ! ” he was saying to himself, breathing freely and loud now, and not troubling to keep quiet. “ Ellen ! Stealing down secretly, after all the house

SINLESS

has retired, to the post-box ! No, she's not mad after all—she's devilish cunning ! Up to something That comes of leaving a woman good-looking and young, to her own devices for ten years ! ”

SINLESS

CHAPTER XIII

“**K**EN,” said Mrs Boyd, looking round a mass of flowers in the centre of the table, “you’ve frowned four times in two minutes without knowing it, and you have sent all your lunch away untasted. What’s the matter?”

Boyd started; to his everlasting chagrin, he felt that he flushed almost like a woman. His wife’s eyes were upon him, so were her mother’s; and an answer was unavoidable. He laughed, but the laugh rung false.

“My dear child,” he said, “if you count my frowns when I’m thinking, you’ll have all your work cut out.”

His mother-in-law, who still posed as an invalid, and was, as usual, lying on the sofa, made a sound that might have been called a derisive snort.

“If you’ll excuse my saying so,” she remarked in a tone that plainly showed her intention to speak whether they excused her or not, “I think Kenyon has done little else but frown to himself since he came home——”

“What, this morning?” he asked smiling.

“I meant since your return from India. I shall begin to suspect you of a liver.”

“I fear,” said Boyd, somewhat sharply, “I owe you an apology for being very poor company, not to say disagreeable.”

SINLESS

"Oh, I don't mind. I was thinking of Helen."

"Helen can take care of herself," remarked that lady with a jolly laugh and a slight wink at Boyd. Then she got up from the table and tucked her arm comfortably into his, and presently led him out of the room to another at the other side of the hall.

"Is anything wrong?" she inquired when she had shut the door. "I wasn't going to give it away to mother that I'd noticed it too, because she never knows when to leave off talking, but you're down about something, aren't you?"

"I don't think I understand you——"

"Oh yes, you do! Is it money? Have you had any losses that you haven't told me about? You need not be afraid that I shall make a fuss. My tastes are simple enough, goodness knows, and what's more I don't mind confiding to you that I've saved a little bit all these years, when you were more than merely generous, and I lived more than merely quietly. A little bit of a house and one servant wouldn't trouble *me*, but I daresay it would jar on you a bit. But we'll come to that presently. When a man worries secretly, frowns to himself," with a fat smile, "can go without his lunch, and starts as if you'd shot a pistol in his ear when you speak to him suddenly, it's one of two things—money or love! Now I know it's not love—at least——"

"I wish you would not be absurd, Helen," Boyd broke in swiftly. He had not flushed again; he felt as though every drop of blood had left his face. "I'm afraid you are growing like your mother—imaginative."

"Not a bit of it," retorted Mrs Boyd with a little

SINLESS

tiptilting of her pretty nose. "I know things or I don't; and I know that you've got something on your mind—say what you will! I can't blame you," she added coming closer to him, and laying a plump little hand on his, "for not confiding in me; after all we're pretty nearly strangers, aren't we, Ken? All the years that have gone make a good gap in the lives of a man and a woman when they spend them apart at opposite ends of the world; but even if we've got to start afresh, and pretty late at that, there's no reason why we shouldn't start by being friends—pals, you know. I've—I've—wanted to say something of this to you before, only there—well, I suppose I was a little shy about it. But this is as good an opportunity as need be. We're not very well suited, Ken, but there are others worse off than us in that respect; I haven't an idea about anything that would accord with yours; I don't think," smiling, and wrinkling up her fat little face, "that I'm what might be called exactly a marrying woman—I enjoyed my years of freedom very much, and I can't pay you the compliment of saying that I was desperately unhappy without you; but all the same I'm glad enough to have you back, and as I said just now, there's no reason, surely, why we shouldn't be the best of pals, even if we can never be lovers——"

"I don't think I called for this information—for——" begun Boyd, with a maddening sense of hopeless uneasiness upon him; but his wife interrupted with her little fat laugh.

"Not in words. I've been watching you for some time, Ken, and, as I've tried to make you see

SINGLESS

more than once or twice, I'm not quite a fool. I can see that you are unhappy, out of your element, restless, jumpy—if you had not such a thorough good temper you'd be irritable—I can see that, for you, life is going all wrong since you came back from India. I can see that when we get back to Wimbledon it will go a good deal worse—it's endurable here, because most of your time has been spent out shooting and up at Hedlam; but a villa isn't in your line, you'll loathe the neighbours calling, and you'll perfectly detest the Vicar and his family——”

Boyd laughed, to ease himself of nervous exclamation which he felt he would have to make.

“My dear girl, I needn't see the Vicar or the neighbours either.”

“You can't avoid it any more than you can avoid seeing me——”

“Who says I desire to avoid that?” inquired Boyd with an attempt at playfulness which was a dismal failure.

“Ken, let's talk sense.”

“With all my heart.” He made the reply hastily, and with his eyes on the clock. The hands were creeping round, his wife threatened to launch into what she called a long talk, and within a quarter of an hour at most he would have to leave the house to be at the cross-roads and to meet Nell, even if he drove. Mrs Boyd saw the impatience in his eyes and heard it in his voice. But there was a vein of obstinacy underlying her good-humoured indifference, and she had determined to have her say.

SINLESS

“Well, what’s wrong? I’ve suggested money and love,” with a merry laugh over the last word, “and you’ve as good as pooh-poohed both. You’re feeling, then, that you won’t be able to stand the life, and you—you are disappointed in me! Is that it?”

“You have an extraordinary knack of——”

“I’ve the brain to see when a person is evasive at all events! You married me of your own free will—I don’t mind being candid enough to own that I married *you* mostly to please mother, though I liked you more than I could ever have liked any other man. I’ve changed in appearance but not in thoughts or ways or views. But I can understand that these past years have made a difference to you that they would never have made to a woman of my temperament. I don’t want to chain you down by my side, and don’t think that I want to get rid of you again. I just want you to realise that we belong to each other and we’ve got to make the very best of it; but that,” with one of her expressive but rather terrible winks, “need not prevent you from travelling, say, and from getting out of home when you think you can’t bear it any more. I shan’t be dull and I shan’t be insulted. Have I put it plainly? Haven’t I expressed myself with nearly sufficient delicacy to please you? It’s not exactly an easy thing to have to say, but I flatter myself I said it rather well—and there you stand looking at me as though you’d never seen me before, and not attempting to compliment me on my able choice of words.”

There was not a trace of anger in her voice; her

SINLESS

pretty little nose—the one feature that remained true to her face—suggested impudent amusement, but good-natured amusement always, and her eyes blue as the sky, and twinkling merrily out of their bed of fat eyelids, and little mountains of soft cheek beneath them, laughed up into his encouragingly.

For the life of him Boyd could make no immediate reply. She was telling him more plainly than she had ever told him by word or act of hers, that he was free to go his way—as free as when the seas divided them; that she could be happy enough with him, but quite happy without him. She was tempting him as she had no idea it would be in her power to tempt him, and she was unconsciously pointing out a path which she herself was making it so very easy for him to take. If he and Nell went to the other end of the earth this very day, he would not have it on his conscience that he had broken his wife's heart. She would scarcely miss him—and he was living out his life in torture beneath the same roof with her! If it were only possible to make Nell see the situation as it really was—if she would only realise how utterly alone, apart from all the rest of the world he and she were; if she would only understand that no one wanted either of them—that they were more free than any two people had ever been yet to go their way, the world forgetting and by the world forgot. And then the hot blood surged over his dark face in shame at the realisation that he had been thinking such thoughts in the very presence of his wife, of the woman who was seeking to hold out to him the hand of friendship, because she had had the wit to discover that friendship only

SINLESS

could ever be their feeling for each other, and because she had no regret for the love that could never be theirs. He had forgotten her, their surroundings, all. Out of the distance, now, it seemed to him, her voice recalled him from the ecstasy of the brief past to the madness of the possible future—recalled him with light, chaffing words spoken in the comfortable certainty that the hint of prediction they held, was but a touch of her own humour.

“There’s only one thing, Ken—I hope you’ll never go and fall in love with some other woman—not that I should be so very jealous, but I couldn’t bear to see you right down unhappy that way—I hate unhappiness altogether you know. If a poor little kiddie is looking into a sweet-shop window, I always have to give it a penny, and it’s not generosity and pity, it’s just that I hate to see a creature miserable when a little thing that I’ve got, perhaps, will make it happy again—and I’m afraid—I’d have to give you up to her—like I give the penny, you know——”

“For God’s sake be silent!” cried Boyd, finding voice at last, and wheeling round upon her so suddenly that even she was a little startled. “Have you any idea what you are saying—do you even know what you talk about, I wonder, when your tongue runs along so fast! Do——”

“I’m sorry if I’ve vexed you—I oughtn’t to have said that, I suppose; but I thought it, and I’m nothing if not honest. Well, you won’t give me your confidence; but I’ve said what was in my mind and——” The entrance of a soft-footed parlour maid cut Mrs Boyd short.

SINLESS

"A letter for you, sir," the girl said, walking up to Boyd and holding out to him Nell's letter on a tray.

"Thank you," he said, and as the servant retired, looked up to see his wife's eyes fixed curiously upon him—looked up to catch a momentary glimpse of his ashen face in an opposite mirror. He had never seen Nell's writing in his life, but he knew the letter was from her—he knew instinctively that it held some message which spelt disappointment, fresh anxiety for him. And he thought that his wife's twinkling eyes must read his mind, that her ears must hear the great throb that his heart had given.

Then he dropped the letter into his pocket with all the carelessness he could assume at the moment, and with a lame, indistinct murmur about being late, turned and left the room. Five minutes later Mrs Boyd heard the dog-cart rattle down the drive.

"Late for what?" she said half aloud, "I don't remember that he said he was going anywhere—perhaps he told mother." And rubbed her handkerchief over the back of a chair where she suspected hidden dust, and forgot her husband altogether in a violent scolding which she inflicted upon the housemaid who had left it there.

Meanwhile, Boyd hastening towards Bookham, let the mare slow down to a trot while he took from his pocket Nell's letter, which told him in a few brief words not only that she was compelled to break her promise to him to-day, but that she was leaving for London that afternoon.

There was not a word beyond the information; the letter begun without a heading, and ended with

SINLESS

her own little name. There was not a trace of regret or anxiety in one line of it, there was not the bare hint of a comforting word—there was nothing on the little sheet of paper that he could treasure and keep and read and re-read again and again. Yet its very coldness, its bareness, told him how hard it had been to pen, how it was made curt and cold only because she had not dared to trust her hand to write more. He had not understood, himself, how he had counted upon meeting her to-day, how he had worried through the long hours, how he had lived only for this one, and the thought of seeing her—built upon this hour that, after all, brought him only a few chill words full of keenest disappointment.

The mare was walking now, at her own sweet will, unheeded by her master; the cold winter sun was dim, the light had gone out of the day and out of the world. The cold sharp air was not colder than his heart, not sharper than the pain of it. The country around him had grown hideous, there was beauty nowhere. Nell had gone—she had said, vaguely, to London, but she had given him no address. A bird came out upon a branch overhead, and with its sweet, gay, sudden song, startled the mare so that she swerved to one side. Boyd instinctively gathered the reins closer; but he looked up at the bird with unseeing eyes, and ears that were deaf to its mellow note.

Nell was gone—the very birds were mute!

SINLESS

CHAPTER XIV

IF the world had grown dark and colourless to Boyd, it was not allowed to become so to Nell, who was kept so busy from the moment when she rose that morning till she and her husband were fairly on their journey to London, that she had hardly time to think, hardly a moment to breathe at ease. Captain Brandling was in silent fits of laughter from breakfast till luncheon was over, albeit he was full of sorrow at parting with his mother's and his guests. But Forbes had been too funny, his complaints had been too childish and amusing, his wants none could satisfy; and Worth went through the ordeal of leaving Hedlam for town with a face so expressionless, with patience so infinite, backed by Mrs Forbes, who kept her temper with wonderful, iron will, that between his spells of laughter, Brandling was lost in admiration of both servant and mistress.

And at last it had ended. Brandling had driven them to the station, he had seen a carriage strewn with foot-warmers, rugs, and newspapers; he had listened to Forbes grumbling at his wife, who seemed to pay little or no heed, he had seen the wonderful cap with its ear-flaps tied carefully under Forbes' chin, and Forbes himself, with all the comforts he could possibly secure, stowed away in the far corner of his compartment, already prepared to drop off

SINLESS

to sleep, and utterly careless of his wife's comfort—after which Brandling and Worth looked, however, with great energy—and he had squeezed Nell's little hands hard, and made her promise to come to Hedlam again very soon.

And then he had watched the train steam out of the station, and had strained his eyes for the last glimpse of Nell's rather watery smile, and had gone back to the carriage in a more thoughtful mood than was usual with him.

"I had thought it was just Beauty and the Beast," he reflected, "but I see it's Beauty and a detestable, brutal old bear. Great Scott! what a life for a child like that!"

And within the fast moving train, Forbes was already snoring, and Nell was leaning forward, her hands palm upwards, and her little tired face resting in them, her eyes dark and misty and full of trouble, fixed on the moving scene beyond, her thoughts with Boyd. He would have received her letter—he would know long before now that she must break her promise to him; or if not, he would have gone to meet her, and he might be waiting at the cross-roads at this very moment. He would wait there perhaps for hours, not knowing why she had failed him. She remembered suddenly that the train would pass through Bookham, that at a level-crossing which was only just above the cross-roads, it would slow down. She might be able to look out—it would be possible to see any one seated in a high dog-cart, waiting there. There was scarcely a moment to lose, already the train was slowing a little and the whistle was shrieking out its warning.

SINLESS

With a quick movement Nell was on her feet, the window was let down, to admit a rush of bitterly cold, damp air. All the country was wrapped in gloom and dusk, but it was not too dusk for her to distinguish Boyd at any rate. In her anxiety she leaned far out of the window, heedless of danger, neither thinking nor caring that the door-catch might be defective and she hurled to her death at any moment; her eyes strained outward to the deserted, dreary roads, her handkerchief ready to wave. With a thrill of something like disappointment she realised that there was no one there to wave to. With at last, an ungovernable feeling of anger, she heard Forbes wailing to her of the draught, of the cold, of the fact that she was "giving him his death." And she came back to her seat, and closed the window with an unnecessary bang.

"Good Lord, Ellen!" exclaimed her irate spouse. "what the dickens are you trying to do—kill yourself? Can't you rest for an hour or two in a train, even, without wanting every window open, and leaning out of it so that you are nearly on the line! What the mischief is the use of me going to this doctor, if you start in by giving me the worst cold I've had this year!"

Nell laughed—she could not help it—though it was indeed a mirthless laugh.

"We don't know yet that there is much use in your going to him at all," she replied with some disdain that she could not hide, "and as for cold—you couldn't catch one in a minute like that—you'll get a far worse one in the damp and chill of London air."

SINLESS

"I should think," offendedly, "that Gratwicke would be a better judge of that than you."

"I'm not so sure—even doctors don't know everything. Shall I read to you?"

"No, not yet—I want to talk." Nell leant back against the padding, and resigned herself to the inevitable with an audible sigh. Never had she been less inclined to talk—with anyone, least of all Forbes; never had she longed more to sit back with closed eyes and to think.

"Yes?" she said as a rather long silence followed her husband's announcement of his desire to talk.

"What were you looking out of the window for?"

"Air." Lies of this sort had become uncommonly easy during the last few weeks.

"Do you generally wave your handkerchief to the air?" There was a new, half sneering smile on his lips as he asked the question, which made Nell start as though some one had shot off a pistol close to her ear. In the half light that was made uncertain by the dimly burning gas that flickered in the roof of the carriage, she could see his small eyes gleaming with a monkeyish look, that was unpleasant and penetrating; and while they rested upon her she felt her face grow warm.

"I—it's a childish habit I've got—of—oh—waving to—to—children as—as—we pass."

Forbes grunted.

"A very childish one," he remarked. Silence again; and this time Nell did not break it. What did he mean? Had he been watching her purposely? Why, for the first time, had he noticed

SINLESS

anything she did? What had brought that look into his eyes? For the first time it occurred to her that it would be possible for him to be desperately cruel.

"You walked out of the room last night just as I was about to tell you my plans," he observed presently, still in a resentful tone. "I've arranged with Gratwicke, to remain in London through the winter, for this man Oswald's convenience; and I think you had better see to the shutting up of the Bray house, and the hunting up of a small one furnished in town."

"But I have never shut up the Manor! Never when I have been in town! There are——"

"What you may have done during my absence in India," and the monkeyish look came again into his eyes, "and what you will have to do now that I am at home once more, are two entirely different things. Expenses, with this new treatment for me, will be very heavy. I don't propose to add to them by keeping a dozen servants and several horses eating their heads off, and doing nothing."

"You're not going to ask me to put my horses down!" she cried in alarm that irritated him.

"No; because they of course can be brought to town, but we don't want an empty house swallowing up money. I should like some small house in the neighbourhood of, say, Kensington—Owen Oswald lives at Knightsbridge—you like Kensington?"

"Not particularly; but it makes no difference if I have to be in town at all. Soon it will be Spring and——"

She paused; soon it would be Spring—soon the

SINLESS

months would have slipped away ; and the sudden remembrance of all which that meant for her struck like a blow that robbed her of speech, and momentarily of the power of thought.

“What of it ?” asked Forbes, quietly sucking menthol and cocaine. “Spring’s the same in one place as the other, to my mind. I’m afraid, Ellen, that our visit to the Brandlings has somewhat spoiled you—I anticipated it, I admit, but——”

“Spoiled me ! What on earth do you mean ? ”

“If you will give me the chance to tell you, I’ll explain. I mean that the flattery and the compliments have not been good for you—they have tended to make you er—how shall I put it ?—er—indifferent—in a measure independent.”

“Indifferent—independent ! I ! To what—of whom ? ”

Forbes shrugged his bundled up shoulders till he looked more like the pantomime gnome to which Nell often likened him in her thoughts, than ever.

“You’ve changed a great deal—lately.”

“Have I ; but it has taken nothing from your comfort, your pleasures, has it ? even if I am changed ? ”

“My pleasures are very few—my comforts would be fewer if I did not insist on them——”

“I have surely done all you wished, all you have ever desired me to do since you came—home.”

“With a bad grace—again lately. I don’t think petting and spoiling good for your sort of character, and I tell you so frankly.”

“But do you imagine,” said Nell, with a smile in spite of herself, “that I have gone through life

SINLESS

without what you call flattery, without a compliment, without friends who have been fond of me and who have, as you would say, perhaps, petted and spoiled me?"

"Not for a moment. I merely meant to point out that I am not the sort of man to go in for that sort of thing, as you have probably discovered by now, and that——"

But Nell had thrown back her head till her matchless little hat was nearly crushed against the padded wall, and was laughing with that lack of restraint that threatened tears to follow. She laughed till her voice died away in a strangled sob, till the bright drops that filled her eyes flowed down her cheeks, till her breast heaved, and till she was too exhausted to utter any sound but a little catching gasp.

"I am glad to have afforded you so much amusement," said Forbes, testily. "Now, if you have finished that hysterical laughter—at what Heaven only knows—I will get you to read me the foreign news."

Nell made no reply; she dried her eyes, and put her hat straight, and she got out the papers and read in the poor light and the swaying train as well as she could manage. Tears and laughter were near still, and she had hard work to control her voice, and keep her mind on the business in hand.

When, by the stations, she saw that London was nearly reached, she put down the paper to Forbes' grunted "Thank you," and gathered some of the rugs in a heap ready for Worth.

"By the way," Forbes said suddenly, "I don't think I told you of the change of hotel. There were

SINLESS

no suitable rooms at either the Savoy or Cecil for me, and it suddenly struck me that I had been rather foolish not to think of the Victoria again. I got Worth to telephone up, and said I'd like the same rooms as you took before, when you came up to meet me from India you know, and I had a message back, just before we left Hedlam, saying we could have 'em, with the large dressing-room turned into a bedroom for me——”

“The Victoria! You—you've taken those rooms—not at the Cecil? You never told me—why did you not tell me? I won't go there—I hate it—they are abominable people—everything so badly done—I—I—mean some may like it but—I—oh, Kenneth—let us go somewhere else—don't let us go there——” Nell paused, breathless, red and white by turns, conscious of having made an exhibition of herself, of having shown something too like terror to be lightly turned off or forgotten.

“I'm afraid you are a little mad, Ellen,” her husband remarked with a slight touch of pardonable irritability in his husky voice. “Your objections are as absurd as unreasonable, and like your habit of waving handkerchiefs to the air, childish. I suppose you had no—er—fuss with the people, no dispute about your bill or anything? No? Then what can it matter in which hotel we stay for perhaps a bare week? The train is stopping—please pull yourself together, and don't make an exhibition of us both on the platform. I shall *insist* now, upon Owen Oswald seeing you.”

“And if you do, I warn you, I'll walk out of—of the place then and there.”

SINLESS

Worth flung open the door at that moment, and his expressionless eyes rested on Mrs Forbes for one second with genuine pity. Then he ventured to put out his hand and to steady her as she stumbled like a drunken woman from the compartment.

SINLESS

CHAPTER XV

THE haste with which Nell fell in with her husband's desire that she would find a small furnished house, should have been gratifying to him at least, and so perhaps it might have been had he not regarded it with faint suspicion. Within two days of their arrival in London the house was found, ready for their immediate occupation, every arrangement made, and nothing left for any one to do but to step in and take possession. It was not a house in the neighbourhood of Kensington, after all, but Nell had not thought of that—it was a house, it was small, it was well furnished, it was in no bad position, and it would take her out of the hotel. She had searched for it with feverish haste, she had hustled the slow-moving, dignified house-agent nearly out of his few wits, she had telegraphed for three of her own servants from Bray, and she had positively romped along with every arrangement in a manner which took away everyone's breath, till there was nothing left to settle, and till Forbes found himself ensconced in a very comfortable if small suite of rooms on the ground floor of a nice, well-kept little house in Half Moon Street. He had protested that it was not Kensington several times, and his wife had feigned not to hear ; he had grumbled, as was his wont, and then he had given up grumbling and protestations

SINLESS

for the pleasure, and in the interest, of watching his wife, whose whole manner was absolutely incomprehensible to him, and inspired him not only with the desire to make a study of her, but to go deep into the reasons for what he considered her most extraordinary behaviour.

With Forbes, to study a person meant simply to watch him or her with suspicion—in Nell's case the suspicion grew with every hour since he had seen her creeping down stairs at Hedlam in the middle of the night to drop a letter into the post-box. He had never watched any one before, and it was a pastime which afforded him unsuspected pleasure, even at times amusement. He had never—if he could help it—given a thought to any one but himself, he had never intended to give any particular thought to his wife, beyond keeping her well up to her duties, beyond keeping her busy always for him; but he found the sensation of being taken out of himself, of watching cat-like, for every suspicious act or look of hers, quite pleasurable.

Forbes' mind was not naturally a refined one, and it *was* naturally a suspicious one. Nell had drawn it away from himself to herself, and she had set it moving actively.

He had started to think about her as he had never thought about her before, and he could not stop. His thoughts were not quite pleasant and not flattering to himself. But he told himself he could afford to wait, and while he waited, he grew more exacting, more trying, both to Worth and Nell every day.

And one morning, when he had fidgeted through

SINLESS

nearly a week waiting for the visit of Dr Oswald, a visit which had been unavoidably delayed, Worth came to announce that the doctor had arrived.

Owen Oswald was a tall, rather spare-figured man, with a clever face that would have been a trifle too grave had it not been for a certain merry twinkle in his eyes that were kind, blue as the sky, and the one really handsome feature of his face. He had a brown healthy skin, a smile that could be nice but that was generally a trifle too cynical, and fine teeth that were almost dazzling in their whiteness.

He came into the room where Forbes was seated, not expecting to find anything so humorous in appearance, and his lips widened into a smile which was full of irrepressible amusement.

"Mr Forbes, I believe," he said, advancing cheerily and holding out his hand. "I had a long letter from Gratwicke, as I expect you know, and he told me so much, that I do not feel we are meeting quite as strangers."

Forbes grunted. He did not quite like the man entering the room with that smile—he was one of those people who imagine that a doctor cannot be clever if he is cheerful.

"I don't know about that," he declared, none too pleasantly, "but if Gratwicke wrote for hours, he couldn't have told you all there is to tell about me."

"Of course not—that remains for you to do, and the rest for me to find out." Oswald's tone was professionally soothing, now, and restored Forbes to as much good-humour as was possible to him.

"Do you believe," he asked suddenly, "that

SINGLESS

rheumatism and bronchitis, can ever really be cured ? ”

Oswald smiled.

“ You must not ask me questions yet,” he said, “ you must answer some of mine—and mind you, I shall put you through a most puzzling list ! ”

And he did. For nearly three quarters of an hour he questioned and Forbes answered—sometimes the young doctor actually seemed to try to chaff him out of several of his pet ideas about himself, and in the end, Forbes discovered that if he intended to go through with this man’s cure, he would have to begin to think about himself in an entirely different way. It seemed a little hard at first, even annoying, but there was something so earnest, so convincing in Owen Oswald’s manner, something about him altogether which inspired so much confidence, that Forbes found himself giving way with less than his usual gracelessness.

“ Now,” said Oswald, “ you are going to take exactly what I send you, you are going to drop all that coddling up in shawls like an old woman, and you must begin by disabusing your mind altogether of the notion that you are anything of an invalid at all. Get them to move your rooms upstairs, trot up and down the stairs two or three times a day yourself, to begin with, and increase that form of natural exercise till you go up and down like an ordinary person. Go out—walk—get in a week-end here and another there—go to the play—in short take on all the amusement you can, and forget all about yourself and your imaginary—forgive me—your imaginary ailments——”

SINLESS

"Imaginary!" Forbes burst out, having kept silence and patience as long as he could. "Imaginary! Do you mean to say you think I imagine pain—imagine I can't breathe—imagine my liver is all—all over the place! Damn it, sir, do you suppose I got you here to make fun of me!"

"Not a bit of it," said Oswald with the utmost good-humour and much amusement, "but you got me here to tell you the truth, and to do you what good I can, and I am trying to do it! I don't say go in for all these things at once—after the life you have apparently led for years, it would be an impossibility; but go in for them by degrees. Get yourself gradually out of the shell into which you have crawled—quite unconsciously, no doubt—and don't go back to it. You are married?" suddenly.

"Yes," disagreeably.

"Poor woman!" was Oswald's inward comment, but aloud he said:

"Pardon me—your wife is young?"

"Good Lord, yes! Do you think I'm such an old fogey that——"

"Not at all—I was thinking that if she were quite young she would be the most excellent companion for you, if you will only allow her to be."

"You see you don't happen to know Mrs Forbes," said Forbes with an ugly sneer that was almost unconscious. And what he might have said next was never known, because at that moment the door opened and Nell looked in, only to draw quickly back.

"I'm so sorry!" she said shyly, "Worth did not tell me that you were not alone, Kenneth——"

SINLESS

"Come in—come in——" said Forbes irritably. Then with a kind of "I told you so" look at Dr Oswald, he added, "Dr Owen Oswald—my wife." And for once there was just a touch of pride—selfish, triumphant pride—in his glance and tone.

Oswald saw and heard neither the one nor the other. He was holding Nell's hand, murmuring something pleasant and meaningless, and looking down at her with a puzzled frown.

"I have been making your husband quite angry with me, Mrs Forbes," he said, still with the puzzled frown, but also a good deal of open admiration in his pleasant eyes, that seemed as though they could not leave her little flushed face. "I want him to do lots of things that at present he considers most disagreeable, but if you will help me, I feel sure we shall conquer him and all his ailments in time."

"Don't for Heaven's sake," broke in Forbes, "put her up to hustling me all over the place. I don't say your idea isn't a good one—I suppose as you know your business as well as Gratwicke swears you do, it's all right—but don't rush me—give me breathing time—don't expect me to do these things all at once."

"I don't—I only say you *must* begin by leading a more active life."

"What is it you want him to do?" inquired Nell, hoping to silence Forbes, who was likely to treat this gifted young man much in the same way as he would treat anyone whom he paid, and with as little consideration as he would bestow upon his man-servant.

"We will talk about that a little later if you will spare me half-an-hour. Mr Forbes has had quite

SINLESS

enough of me for one day ! Don't begin by contradicting me, my dear sir—good-bye ; I shall call to see you on Friday—mind you've done a little bit of stair-climbing by then."

Dr Oswald held open the door for Nell to pass out as he spoke, and presently closed it again and followed her across the hall to a small morning-room at the other side.

"May I stay a little while—are you busy now, Mrs Forbes ? Do you mind ?"

"No—indeed. You want to talk to me about the treatment for my husband ?"

"Yes ; I talked to him—very straight, and he did not like it."

"He's not used to it. What did you tell him ?"

She leant back in a big chair near the fire as she spoke, and felt, with half discomfort, half resentment, that his eyes travelled from the toes of her shoes to the top of her head. It was true that there were admiration, curiosity, and something like bewilderment in them, but not one of these held a touch of anything that could offend.

And then Oswald repeated to her a good deal of what he had said to Forbes.

"Absolutely," he added, "if he ever hopes to be worth anything again, he must not lead the life he has been leading. He must go out and about—he must walk—you can make him. Worry him till he takes you to the theatres, to receptions, to all the social functions that you of course must attend. You follow me ? Make him think of something but himself."

"You set me a colossal task," returned Nell with

SINLESS

a little unconscious curl of her pretty lips that told the quick-eyed man before her more than she dreamed, "and one to which I fear I am quite unequal. Why don't you see what you can do with his man—Worth has immense influence with him, and I fancy he is just a trifle afraid of Worth—now I never inspired fear in even a small Page!"

"Still, I want your help more than Worth's—I want the sort of help that you alone could give me. But I will not worry you about that now, Mrs Forbes. I'll wait and see what impression my words have made upon him, and whether reflection makes him see a little the wisdom of following my advice as far as I have given it. First of all, though, hustle him out of those rooms—move his bedroom upstairs—and get him out of the way of sleeping in snatches and in a chair."

He watched her while he was speaking. He saw the colour come and go in her cheeks; his keen, practiced eyes took in at once the unnatural shadows beneath hers, the faintly drawn look about her mouth, the slight depressions in the soft rounded cheeks. And he deliberately turned the conversation from Forbes, and talked to her lightly and quite amusingly for several minutes. Then he rose, and with the renewal of his promise to come again on Friday, left her. He walked very slowly and thoughtfully in the direction of Piccadilly, his eyes alternately set upon the damp pavement and the dull, leaden sky. Then he hailed a hansom and gave the address of his own house. And he threw himself back in one corner of the cab and frowned hard while he puzzled, half aloud:

SINLESS

“Where have I seen that woman before? Hers is not a face that any man is likely to forget—and yet I don’t know her, and it was evident that she remembered me not at all. But for all that her face is quite familiar—I’ve heard her voice too. When it had that shy tone as she first entered the room I recognised it—when there was that keen touch of alarm in it at one or two things I said about that horror of a husband of hers, it seemed more than ever to come back to me familiarly. Hang it! Of all the worrying things—ah!——”

The exclamation was so sudden, so sharp, that the driver heard it and lifted the trap.

“Did you speak to me, sir?”

“No—no. Go on. By Jove, I have it!” Oswald added to himself. And before his mind’s eye there rose the worst fog of the year—a black dead wall of smoky, choking mist, out of which towards him there came a woman whose voice was full of fear, and whose hands went out to him eagerly, trustfully, as she asked his help. He was saying cheering words to her and piloting her safely from somewhere about the Temple to Charing Cross; and then he was saying good-bye to her, beneath the dim lights of the fog-filled station, and telling her that he hoped she would meet her husband safely. She was thanking him gratefully, in her pretty low voice, and telling him that but for his assistance she did not know what would have become of her. The whole scene came back to him; and a little smile of recollection and distinct relief at that recollection played round his mouth and in his eyes.

SINLESS

“Of course—it is she! I remember perfectly how she was lost in the fog, and how she was going to meet her husband at Charing Cross. I knew her voice and face were familiar to me, though I’ve hardly thought of her from that night till this day. And so she did find him safely—and what a find! He says he has been in England but a few months after years spent in India—it was just about the time of his return that I met with her—that very night in the fog! Curious what a small world it really is. I must talk to her about it and see if she remembers.

“She puzzles me a bit even now that I can place her. She’s ill and she’s hiding it—she’s failing, and she won’t give in. She is in a state of nerves—by Jove, she is a far more interesting study than the man, I’ll warrant!”

The sudden stopping of the cab roused him from thought, and the young doctor, contrary to his custom went about for the rest of the day unable to forget his new patient, and still more unable to forget that patient’s wife.

SINLESS

CHAPTER XVI

“**A**ND you really think I am better? I think I am myself, but I might be mistaken where you are not.” Forbes made the remark, and asked the question with his head a little on one side, as was his habit whenever he was rather pleased with himself. The world was a month older, and Dr Oswald had become part and parcel of the little house in Half Moon Street. He was to be seen there every day; in company with Forbes or Mrs Forbes he was to be seen driving sometimes, at social gatherings, even once or twice at the theatre. Forbes had grown to look upon his presence as an absolute necessity—he pooh-poohed the idea of Nell helping to drag him out of what Oswald called his shell—no one but the doctor himself could do that.

And the doctor did it. His time was almost all his own, his practice was as yet very small, his patients numbered scarcely half-a-dozen, and all these were men who had demanded his whole attention as did Forbes. He had performed some wonderful cures, he had seemed to handle his patients and their ailments much as he chose, with ease and sometimes what looked like carelessness, that was remarkable, and all those who had given themselves up entirely to his treatment had reason to be more than merely grateful to him. But as

SINLESS

yet, he was practically unknown. Forbes knew this ; he paid him a high fee, and he demanded his constant attention and almost his constant companionship. With Mrs Forbes the young doctor did not get on quite so well ; it was plain to him that she made every effort to avoid him, and while she was never uncivil she was also never at all friendly. She had, as Oswald had predicted to himself that she would, proved a far more interesting study than her husband ; and slight as had been his opportunities of studying her during the last month, the doctor had contrived to make several little discoveries concerning his patient's wife, which if they hardly surprised him, at least puzzled him. He was thinking over them now, behind an evening paper, when Forbes' question brought him back to the present and his surroundings.

"Think you are really better?" he answered suddenly, as one might whose thoughts had been far away. "My dear sir, I'm positive of it—you are better, I'll wager, than you have been for the last two or three years, anyhow."

"That's true—quite true. I wouldn't be surprised if you really did make a new man of me!" Forbes spoke in his usual patronising tone, apparently making no more difference in speaking to Dr Oswald than he would have made in speaking to the butcher ; and the doctor, who was used to him now, and a little amused too, nodded and smiled, and then looked up in sudden surprise as his patient went into such a fit of unrestrained laughter that the chances were he would choke.

"What on earth's the matter?" asked the younger

SINLESS

man. "You'll do yourself an injury if you laugh like that! What has amused you?" But Forbes declined to reply, and laughed on till from sheer exhaustion, he was forced to cease.

"Delighted to hear such a good account of myself," he said after a long pause, but was well aware that his companion did not believe him. "Well, look here, Oswald, now that I'm a little bit out of hand as it were, I want you to turn your attention to my wife."

"I've done that already."

"Ah! You've noticed, too, that there is something wrong?"

"Anybody, without the trained eye could see that her health is failing—I thought you knew."

"Knew! Of course I could see it too, but then women have such silly fads, and they are always eating unwholesome things in the way of sweets, and drinking unlimited tea, and ruining their digestions."

"Mrs Forbes has no fads that I can discover, and as for the rest, why, I believe she starves."

"Wants to get thin, then, or something. You have not spoken to her?"

"Certainly not. Unless she consulted me, or you had mentioned it, it was not my business."

Forbes was laughing again—this time in a sort of delighted chuckle.

"Well, I'll tell you," he said, "why I did not say anything to you before. First I did not want you interrupted in your attention to me," Oswald's eyebrows went up disgustedly—he could not help it; "and then she swore that if I ever said a syllable

SINGLESS

about her to you she would walk out of the house there and then."

"Oh, then it was personal objection to me."

"Not a bit of it. She did not know you when she said that. It was quite a month ago; the day, in fact, when we started from Hedlam for town. She was put out, and it rather appeared to me, upset at leaving so hastily—women have no consideration for any one but themselves—and I suppose because she was extra worried, I noticed that she was looking anything but well. I," not looking at Oswald, who was watching him keenly, "have—have—observed her more closely since, and really sometimes I think she is a little——" He tapped his forehead to finish the sentence with an illustration of his meaning. "Something I said, set her going almost into hysterics in the train, then I caught her leaning out of the window in a most dangerous manner and waving her handkerchief to children at the level-crossing, if you please! and after, when I happened to tell her that I had changed our hotel and that I had telephoned to the Victoria—indeed for the very rooms she had occupied when she came up to town to meet me on my arrival from India, and that I'd secured them, I thought she would have gone into a fit—absolutely for nothing! I told her I should get you to have a look at her, and it was then that she declared if I did, she'd walk out of the house."

"I don't wonder," retorted Oswald somewhat sarcastically. "If you tell a woman you'll get a doctor to 'have a look at her' much as you'd order your coachman to overhaul a horse, I'm not sur-

SINLESS

prised that she's a bit put off. I expect that is why she dislikes me."

"Does she dislike you?"

"At all events she avoids me—she seems a little bit afraid of me—I can see why now."

"Oh, can you?" answered Forbes in a tone that somehow made the doctor vaguely conscious of having said the wrong thing. "Why?"

"Oh, I suppose she thinks I shall watch her, and perhaps," with a slight laugh, "prescribe for her."

"Well, that's what I want you to do. If she thinks I've spoken to you, she'll get into a rage; if you do it—I mean tell her what you think—on your own responsibility, perhaps she'll listen."

"You mean me to understand that you are anxious about her?"

"I don't want her falling ill just as I'm getting better and she can presently travel about a bit with me, as you have ordered. I dare say a good talking to and attention to diet would put her right; and it's unfair to me and every one, to go and lay herself up, when naturally she is a young lion of strength. Women never value their health till they've lost it. To be absolutely candid, Oswald, I'm—I'm a bit suspicious that there's something on her mind—something troubling her that—I know I can trust you—the fact is my wife and I are practically strangers. As you know, I've been out of England for upwards of ten years, and she has not been with me—as you probably don't know. I ought never to have married—women are a nuisance at best, and I don't understand them at all, or wish to. My wife's a mighty good-looking woman, and she's

SINLESS

young—she has been younger still, during all the years of my absence, and I cannot help wondering if it is possible,” with his head on one side, “that she can have formed some attachment.”

“I’m quite certain,” interrupted Oswald with some suppressed heat, “that whatever you think you have no right to talk to me of your wife in this way. Hang it all, man, I’m nearly a stranger to you, and absolutely one to her.”

“Oh, if you’re going to take it like that,” grumbled Forbes offensively, “well and good—I’ll say no more, but I can think anyhow ; and as I wanted you to find out if she is fretting, or what the dickens is the matter, I thought a hint would help you along.”

Oswald admitted to himself that the hint was helping him along, but he was not going to admit it to Forbes.

“All right,” he said presently, “I’ll see what I can do so far as her health is concerned, but I’m not going——”

“You can take it from me I’m right somewhere—women don’t change as she has changed lately unless——”

“And called some druggists and physicians,
And tried to prove his loving spouse was mad,
But as she had some lucid intermissions,
He next decided she was only bad !”

quoted Oswald, twisting the lines to suit the occasion, and bringing a vexed frown to Forbes’ ugly little eyes.

“Oh, if you’re going to spout Don Juan at me—I’ve spoken to you in confidence——”

“You need not trouble to remind me of that. I think I’ll be off now. Good-night—oh, and don’t forget to tell Worth about the new medicine.”

SINLESS

CHAPTER XVII

NELL was coming down Regent Street as swiftly as a high March wind, which threatened to lift her off her feet, and a light fall of snow, fine as powdered glass, which blew blindingly into her eyes, would allow her. She paused at the corner end of Swan and Edgar's to gain breath, and then, turning quickly, ran into the arms of a woman, who hailed her delightedly, and drew her rapidly out of the crowd. She was a woman with a large round face, a larger and rounder voice, she was tall and very stout and carried an armful of parcels. And Nell recognised her instantly with a sinking heart.

"What luck!" she exclaimed breathlessly, roaring her remark through the wind. "Wherever have you and Ken got to lately? Fancy running up against you here too, just by purest accident! Why, it's four months—four months on the 23rd—since I saw either of you! You remember," peering into the girl's flushed face, "how you were just leaving the Victoria Hotel when we last met? You'd missed Ken, in that horrible fog we had, and you were just off home, and I was going up to see Milly. Dear—dear—it only seems like yesterday! And when I got back to Bray, I found you had both gone, and the house was practically closed; and I heard you'd gone to some friends of the Champ-

SINLESS

erownes—the Brandlings. Well, let's walk on a little bit—where are you staying—still at the Vic——”

“No,” broke in Nell hastily. “We have a furnished house in Half Moon Street—Kenneth is in town to consult some new doctor, who is already doing him a great deal of good.”

“Oh, indeed! I'm glad of that. I thought him looking well, though, even in that glimpse I got of him, on that morning when I came to town—you remember.”

“Oh, yes! I remember,” said Nell desperately, feeling that a repetition of the events of that day would drive her mad. Of all the cruel tricks Fate had played her, this was surely one of the most cruel—to fling this woman, of all others, across her path.

“Are you going home now? You might, if you were very sweet,” with a loud laugh and a brisk nod of her head, “ask me back to tea? I've known your dear husband ever since he was a little kiddie, so I don't feel it's cheek to invite myself, though you and I don't know much of each other—and that's all your fault, young lady!” Her tone was jocose, her face very red, and if her eyes were unusually watchful as they fastened themselves on Nell's face, Nell did not notice, because she was feigning to battle with a gust of wind before answering, and asking herself meantime what she could and should do. She knew the woman sufficiently well to be sure that flight was as impossible as excuse; Nell might say she was not going home, but her companion would demand her address and would surely turn

SINLESS

up to see Forbes. After all, did it matter much really? Nell tried to comfort herself with the recollection that she had only met her on that fatal morning just as she was leaving the hotel—that the woman had been too busy telling her about Forbes to have noticed Boyd. Nell remembered that he had stepped far aside in the hall, and that there were many other people there beside themselves. If this woman alluded to that time, she knew no more than did Forbes, than did the rest of the world—it would be folly, perhaps worse, to seem to put her off.

Her face was hot when she turned it to her companion.

“I—I beg your pardon,” she said. “This fearful wind takes one’s breath away, does not it? I—we—Kenneth will be charmed I am sure, if you will come back. Shall we have this cab?” She hailed a passing hansom as she spoke, and her companion smiled a little grimly to herself.

(“A bit jumpy at meeting me!” she said inwardly, “but can’t well get out of it, brazen little cat!”)

“Well, and so you are in town?” she said when they were seated. “Have you given up Bray?”

“Oh, no. We are staying up for this doctor, you know. Dr Owen Oswald—have you ever heard of him?”

“No; and so he’s doing Ken a lot of good—I’m very glad. I suppose you hardly know yourself after all these years of freedom? I must say you were very quiet, and lived a very simple life for so young and pretty a woman. Do you miss the freedom?”

SINLESS

"Not at all," returned Nell untruthfully, and with a suspicion of haughtiness in her voice. "Miss Blake—she is still in town—she is well?"

"Very fairly. She has gone to her people in France. Ah! are we here?" She struggled out of the cab, followed by Nell, and there was an expression on the lady's face that told of expected enjoyment.

Five minutes later she was grasping Forbes' hands, shouting in his ears her delight at seeing him, and being introduced to Dr Oswald, who had come in a few moments before her.

"Your wife tells me you are taking some sort of cure? Bravo! It looks as though it agreed with you! Never saw you looking better—now, Mrs Forbes wants a doctor's care more than you by the look of her—eh, Dr Oswald?"

"Oh, please leave me out of the discussion," pleaded Nell, vexed, while she threw aside her furs and sunk into a chair with the air of one quite fatigued. "People will insist on it that I am delicate because I have not cheeks like a dairy-maid. Shall I tell them to bring tea in here, Kenneth, or——"

"Oh, in here by all means. I feel disinclined to move, and I'm sure Mrs Jessop won't mind. I have not had a talk with you for many years."

"Only those few minutes on the station at Maidenhead, when you'd lost your wife in a fog and were sending wild telegrams all over the place. It was funny, thought it was vexing too—you ought to have seen him, Mrs Forbes."

"You are not going, Dr Oswald?" inquired Nell

SINLESS

as the doctor rose, and for the first time she looked at him with something like appeal in her eyes. She had caught a half-pitying expression in his eyes lately, something more kind than she had suspected ; and it seemed to her in some vague, unaccountable way, now, that in this room he was her one friend. "Do stay and drink some tea, though you may condemn the habit." She stretched out her hand and touched his arm, and even through his coat sleeve he could feel that it was burning hot. For one moment, unseen by either of the others, he covered it with his own, and there was something in the firm warm clasp that gave Nell courage.

"I wondered where you two had got to," Mrs Jessop was telling Forbes loudly, while Nell's eyes thanked Oswald, and he resumed his seat. "Then I heard from the Champerownes. It was quite a bit of luck running up against your wife to-day."

"Where are you staying ?" asked Forbes.

"Well, nowhere, at present. The fact is I've only just come up to town this very day, and as Milly's left her hotel I shall have to find a room somewhere—I'm bound to remain for the week anyway, and I'm rather regretting that I don't belong to one of these womens' clubs you know—only people are such scandal mongers that——"

"You must stay here, my dear madam, we can put you up easily, can't we, Ellen ? There's room—plenty."

"Could you really—would you ?" cried Mrs Jessop, to whom the saving of a hotel bill was a joy in the mere thought only, indeed, and looked uncertainly in Nell's direction.

SINLESS

"We have a spare room," the girl said, with set teeth and a wild effort to smile, to infuse into her tones even a touch of cordiality.

"How awfully good of you! How sweet! Thanks so much—I've only a bag, which I left in the cloak-room at Waterloo, and I can send for that later. I said it was luck, meeting you, and it is! It will be quite like old times, Ken—only when I remember you best you were not married! You must let me help you if I can, Mrs Forbes—give Ken his physic and all that sort of thing you know. No," with scarcely a pause for breath, and unconscious that Oswald was regarding her with some of the horror a man always has of a very talkative woman, "I'll tell you why I particularly dislike staying alone at a hotel—people," mysteriously, "will talk. Oh, I know I'm no longer young, or beautiful, but even so, one has to be a bit careful. People are such frightful, pardon me, liars. Now, I'll give you a case in point——"

("How she talks!" murmured Nell in an undertone to the doctor, with a little pale smile more sad than tears.

"Why don't you get away? Go to bed; let me send you something—you really are ill," he murmured back.)

"I'll give you a case in point," went on Mrs Jessop turning round just as Nell shook her head in answer to Oswald's whisper. "It'll make you laugh particularly."

"Why?" inquired Nell, glad to be able to say something.

"I'll tell you. You remember the day we met

SINLESS

on the stairs of the Victoria, just as you were flying off home to Bray—— ? ”

“ You met there that day ? You never told me, Ellen,” said Forbes, looking hard at his wife’s white face.

“ I suppose I forgot,” she returned faintly, “ it wasn’t very important anyway.”

“ Well,” Mrs Jessop continued, with what Oswald thought real relish, and Nell thought cruel, maddening persistence, “ that morning I went up to see Milly—I told you on the stairs, but I daresay you’ve forgotten that too,” with a jolly laugh. “ The fact is she couldn’t get back to you quickly enough, Ken ; so we must forgive her memory ! I went up to Milly, anyhow, and on my way I noticed some rooms that were empty, and which turned out afterwards to have been vacated by *you*, that I thought Milly would like better than those she had been obliged to take when the place was so full.” Mrs Jessop paused to take a sip of tea, and to dispose of a fragment of bread and butter ; and Oswald saw that Nell’s face was livid. “ And so I told Milly, and we sent for the chambermaid to ask if they really were free. ‘ Twenty five, six and seven ? ’ she said, ‘ the lady *and gentleman* have just gone—*Mr and Mrs Forbes !*’ Ha ! ha !—there now, was a mistake for you ! A nice kettle of fish if it had been someone else ! Of course it did not matter, because she only said it to me and Milly, and *we* knew it was a mistake, and *I* knew that you had come up to meet Ken and missed him, and all that—but supposing I hadn’t—and I’d been one of those horrid scandal-loving people—and you’d been there—and——”

SINLESS

"Oh, will you be quiet!" burst out Nell, unconscious of what she was saying, desperate, goaded almost to madness. "I—I—beg your pardon—my head is raging—and you——" But words failed her. So did her legs; and as she rose to take flight from the room, before Oswald, who had not missed one fleeting expression of her poor harassed little face, could spring up to her rescue, the floor seemed to give way beneath her, and with a little cry she fell backwards, her head coming with a crash upon the fender bars.

"Good Heavens!" cried the visitor. "I knew she was looking awful, but why on earth did she not say that her head was so bad before?"

"If you will allow me," said Oswald, turning quietly to Forbes, with Nell lying white and silent in his arms now, "I'll carry Mrs Forbes upstairs to her room and tell the servants what to do for her."

"Let me come—pray let me come!" urged Mrs Jessop, but the doctor waved her unceremoniously aside.

"I prefer the parlour-maid," he said.

"She's been ill for weeks," declared Forbes, helping himself to more bread and butter, "but she's so obstinate, and headstrong, and won't take advice. Give me a little more tea, please, Mrs Jessop."

SINLESS

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN Nell came back to life she found herself in bed, in a darkened room that she thought empty of everyone but herself, and with a sharp, stinging pain at the back of her head, which was put back on a pillow covered with cool, damp cloths. As memory returned to her, the slow tears filled her eyes, and through them she suddenly saw Dr Oswald coming towards her from the far corner of the room.

He slid his arm beneath her shoulders, and held to her lips a glass.

"Don't speak till you have finished this," he said, "then you may talk to me, but no one else."

"How long have I been here?" she questioned when she had obeyed him.

"Four or five hours."

"Then it is night?"

"Yes."

"And you have been here all the time?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You wanted a good deal of looking after—and——" looking her full in the eyes, "I thought you would prefer that I should attend you than that they should call in someone who—might understand your wishes less. There—there——" as she looked

SINLESS

at him startled, "don't worry. I'm your friend—remember that, anyhow."

It seemed to her then, that he had seen into her very soul. Her heart and her mind were laid bare to him; and the secret they had cherished was no longer hers alone.

With a little stifled murmur she turned and hid her face between the pillow and his arm; and he was silent—he waited till she should speak.

"What have I done to my head?" she asked at last.

"Nothing very much. You gave it a nasty knock on the fender; but it will be all right by to-morrow, and if you will not bother it about anything you'll be about in a couple of days at most."

"Is—is she—Mrs Jessop—here still?"

"Rather! Bentley is looking after her; and she has dragged your husband off to the theatre. I advised him to go; I thought it would save her fussing over you, and by the time they get back I can have her locked out of your room. I'm going to stay here to-night."

"Why?" sharply. "I'm—I'm—not ill—you said so."

"I know. But I'm going to stay—I'm going to see nobody worries you."

"How good you are," she whispered faintly, twining her fingers for a moment round his.

"I am—wonderfully!" he laughed. "Now, reward me—go to sleep, and don't think of anything or anybody."

"Very well; thank you." He moved gently in the direction of the door.

SINLESS

"Dr Oswald," Nell called faintly, and he returned at once. "You won't go away?"

"No, I promise."

"They—he—won't think it odd?"

"Not a bit of it—leave all that to me."

"And if—and you won't—and—oh——"

"If they both question me till they haven't a breath left, I shall only be able to tell them that you have given your head a bad bump, that you are very tired, that I've given you something to put you to sleep, that you are a very obstinate woman, and I've had to stupefy you into obedience, and that by the day after to-morrow you will be flying all over the place again. Now, are you satisfied that I'm not quite a fool?"

"You are an angel of goodness, I think."

"That's right. Now, good-night."

Once downstairs, the smile left the doctor's eyes, his face took on a very grave, distressed expression. He threw himself back into a chair by the fire, and fell so deeply into thought that the hours passed unheeded, unnoticed, till he was roused by the return of Mrs Jessop and Forbes.

"How is she?" demanded the lady at once of Oswald.

"Oh, doing splendidly. It's a mere scratch. She will be all right to-morrow."

"Did you manage to find out what made her faint?" asked Nell's husband.

"Yes; she's been suffering, it seems, for several days with neuralgia, and had taken some powders, which were evidently doing her more harm than good. She was out in the wind to-day, and that

SINLESS

put the finishing touch to the pain. Then she tried to keep up while Mrs Jessop," bowing a little to the lady, "was entertaining us all—and there you are, you see."

"Humph!" said Forbes, and his mouth and eyes grew hard.

"But you're staying all night on her account," struck in Mrs Jessop, "you are sure you are not saying this just to ease our minds?"

The doctor smiled in a way that Mrs Jessop did not quite like.

"You are mistaken, madam, I am staying entirely on Mr Forbes' account."

"Oh," said the visitor; and Forbes said:

"Oswald, ring the bell, will you?—I can manage my supper now, I think."

It was about eight o'clock in the evening, three days later, when Nell crept down the stairs a little falteringly, and letting herself through the hall-door went out into the dark blustery night alone. She had excused herself earlier in the evening from accompanying Mrs Jessop and her husband to a concert, and they had left her in peace at home and alone. On the morrow their visitor would be leaving—to-night at least was Nell's own.

She walked slowly through the streets till a cab came in sight; then she hailed it, gave the driver Dr Oswald's address, and in less than ten minutes was being shown into the doctor's study.

"Is this wise?" he asked, coming forward without any other greeting, and taking both her little icy hands. "You really ought not to be out on a night like this."

SINLESS

"I don't know," she returned, "I only knew I had to see you, and I should have come through a river to do that."

"You might have sent for me."

"No, I had rather be here."

"Well, I won't argue with you. Come, tell me the trouble." He drew forward a chair, and took away her fur coat, and waited patiently for her to speak. But she was very silent. Her face was white as death one moment, and flushed like the heart of a rose the next, and her eyes were fixed on the fire.

"I came because I wanted to ask you something—to say something to you, and—and—now—I cannot find the words," she said miserably, and with that undertone of shyness in her pretty voice that had attracted so many.

"But try—you know you can trust me, surely? I told you the other night, I am your friend—remember that."

"It is why I came to you."

"Well, let it be why you open your heart to me. I think I understand something, at all events, of what you want to say, and I know how difficult it must be for a woman like you. But if you will just remember that I—I—am wiser than the rest of the world—that already your secret is shared with me, whether you would or not—you won't find it quite so hard to speak." Her face grew hot again, and her breath came unevenly. And he, wishing to give her time to recover, said lightly :

"Are you a believer in Fate?"

"In Fate! *In Fate!* Oh, my God! Believe in it! When I am its most miserable victim!"

SINLESS

"Poor child! Well, I was going to ask you if you remember a certain foggy night quite three months ago now when someone helped you to find your way to Charing Cross."

"It—it was you then! Oh, I have thought so often that I knew your face a little: I was sure I knew your voice!"

"I remembered you the moment we met, but it took me an hour or two to recall our first meeting. I was only going to say that I think I am fated to help you, so bear that in mind."

"You never reminded me before, why?"

"I never had much opportunity; and I think it must have been a sort of instinct that held me silent. Added to that, you seemed to dislike and to avoid me, and I thought you would not care to remember."

"I never disliked you—I——"

"No, I understand now. Forbes was always urging you to consult me, and you thought I should watch you. Won't you tell me, now, what you came to tell me?"

"Yes. I—I—want you to try to—get him—my husband—to let me go away—for—for—a good while, several months, where—where—I could be alone—where he would not go too. Oh, I know it would be difficult—almost impossible—but he believes in you so completely now, and he'd listen to you where he would not heed me, and—and—oh, don't you see it is only you who could do it—it—it—is my only chance——" She had risen and was walking restlessly up and down the room. The first words spoken, the rest came more easily, feverishly, rapidly.

SINLESS

"Because—what that abominable woman told as a joke was—true?" he asked very low.

"Yes. Oh, if I explained—if I told you the whole story you never could understand, you never could bring yourself to believe——"

"My dear, I should believe every word you uttered, no matter how wild or improbable it might be, because I believe you are incapable of a harmful lie, because I am certain you are the soul of truth and honour."

"Ah! you mock me."

"God forbid—I do not. I have studied people all my life—I know human nature—and I don't meet a good woman without knowing it."

"A good woman!" she cried, covering her face with her hands, and sinking down again into a chair by the table. "A good woman! You say that to me, knowing what you know, and yet you are not mocking me!"

"I say it to you unhesitatingly. Do you think I am narrow-minded prig enough to pretend to despise you for a mistake, a fault—the fault only of, perhaps, too great trust? Do you think I should dare to look down lightly upon you because you are human, a very woman to your soul, loving, and craving love. Thank God, I have at least the justice in me to admit that if a man would but measure a woman's life by his own, he would understand that he had a right to expect very little. Don't you realise that I can understand what your temptations may have been—don't you know that I have learned enough of your life and that of your husband, who could live his at one side of the world

SINLESS

while he left you to your own devices at the other, to tell me that if ever a woman needed pity, not censure, that woman is yourself! Poor child! I understand that you have no loophole of escape in your husband's eyes and in the eyes of the world; but all the contempt in my heart is first for the man who could leave you, and next for the man who has brought you to——”

“Do not—do not!” she said, putting out her hands before her as though he had struck her. “Oh, you are good and pitiful—you are such a friend as surely no woman ever had yet; but you don't understand—you can't—you never will. You deserve that I—I—should tell you all; but even then, you would blame—and it would not be just——”

“Just! Good God! What sort of a treacherous, pitiful cad is the man who has tempted you to——”

“No—no——”

“Be angry if you will—woman that you are, be lenient and forgiving through your love—but I will say, what can he be that you are here, throwing yourself on the mercy of a stranger at this moment, at such a time—instead of with him——!”

“You don't understand,” she kept wailing, again and again. “It is I—it is my fault, or my will, that I am here—he—he—does not know——”

“Granted he is ignorant of what is to come, he is not ignorant of what has passed. God! if it was a woman I loved——”

She went across the room to him swiftly, and silenced him with her hand put before his mouth.

“Don't! Your blame of—of—him—hurts me more than any contempt you could have heaped

SINLESS

on me. You know that—that—I should not have been apt to consider my—my husband ; no one in their senses would expect a woman to think much of duty in such a case. He cares nothing for me, nor ever has for anyone but himself, all through his life ; and he would not mind if I left him to-morrow except for the scandal and the talk. If I died, his only regret would be that he could never find a paid servant who would bear with his temper, and wait upon him as carefully. You know what I am saying is the truth—you know if—if—I exchanged the misery of my life for the love that I might have, no one in his heart could honestly deem me wrong.”

“ And yet——”

“ And yet one must not make the innocent suffer—the wife who never harmed me by thought or act.”

“ Forgive me,” he said, taking her hands and leading her, weak and helpless as she was, to a chair. “ I have given you pain—I judged quickly and harshly. You are right, I’m afraid I don’t thoroughly understand. One day perhaps you will give me your whole confidence. Meantime the way in which you want my help—the getting away—the length of time—it will be difficult. It will want more thought than I can give it offhand at the present moment—it will want planning. Will you let me think about it, and let you know a little later ? ”

“ I have no right to come to you like this—to force my troubles on you, have I ? ”

“ I give you the right, anyway,” he smiled.

SINLESS

Then suddenly, "You have a mother?" A little shudder went over, her very lips grew white.

"Yes; but you understand—I have no one."

He was silent, touched to the heart by the pathos of those few words.

Five minutes later he had put her cloak round her again.

"Let me put you into a cab," he said.

SINLESS

CHAPTER XIX

WHILE Nell had been paying her short visit to Owen Oswald, her husband and Mrs Jessop, grown tired of their evening's entertainment, returned to Half Moon Street, leaving a bare, chill concert-room for a cheery fireside, which was far more to Forbes' taste.

Mrs Jessop had made no demur when he had suggested that they should go home ; indeed, she watched him with great interest. She had very sharp eyes, and she had noticed, even during her short visit to Forbes and his wife, that it had become the man's way to do many things that were wholly unexpected. He would announce his intention of remaining indoors all day, in spite of anything Oswald might say, and then, just as Nell came into the hall dressed for driving or for walking, he would decide to accompany her.

Mrs Jessop saw that he was now as much interested in his wife as he had been interested only in himself, and that when he seemed to be striving only after his own comfort, when he was continually grumbling at the lack of attention bestowed upon him, he was all the time watching Nell with sharp, calculating eyes, listening for her every word with ears that might appear deaf to all she said, but which never missed a sound. He would seem to excuse her willingly from joining a theatre or concert party,

SINLESS

and then before half the evening was over he would decide to return to his home. And a queer smile would play for a moment round all that could be seen of his mouth beneath its stubbly beard, when he heard that Mrs Forbes was at home, in her own rooms, and when he saw the light of unmistakable disappointment which Nell, to save her life, could not keep out of her tell-tale eyes.

To-night, when his man came to meet him at the foot of the stairs, Forbes gave the usual order.

"Tell Mrs Forbes, one of you, that I have come back."

"Mrs Forbes is not at home, sir," said Worth with what Mrs Jessop, listening carefully, thought a touch of real relish in his even, usually toneless voice.

"Not at home! Not at home! God bless me! where's she gone at this time of night?"

"I couldn't say, sir; I will inquire if any message was left with Bentley."

"Yes, do—and bring something to the library—some sandwiches, biscuits, wine—you know."

"Yes, sir."

"Not at home!" repeated Forbes, breathing rather more heavily, and turning to look the visitor straight in the face. "What do you think of that?"

"My dear Kenneth, there isn't anything to think. I expect," with a fat laugh, "that she made up her mind you and I wouldn't be back till well after eleven, and she got tired of her own company, and sought some congenial companions — or — *companion*," and laughed again, while she unwound her head out of a wonderful fleecy shawl, and while

SINLESS

Forbes fixed upon her red, expressive face, eyes that seemed anxious to read her every thought.

"Do you mean anything?" he inquired huskily, and throwing his thick, squat body heavily down into a chair by the fire. The gas was turned very low, the flame from a huge lump of coal which had just split in two, sent a flickering, dancing light over Forbes' face, that looked a trifle pale to-night. "Gone out to see anyone at ten o'clock, and after——"

"I don't see why not; and as for meaning anything, well, what is there to mean?"

"You answer my question with another, and that is the sort of evasion that in my mind is always suspicious. I never *was* suspicious of any living creature till lately, but—but—upon my word if there isn't some game that Ellen is up to, or has been—I'll—I'll——"

Mrs Jessop put a quick finger warningly on her lip, and said, "Tezzy voo!" which Forbes rightly interpreted as a suggestion that he should hold his tongue till the servant, who was just entering with a well-laden tray, should have departed again.

"Bentley says, sir, that Madam left no message. Bentley thinks that Madam expected you would be late."

"Um!" grunted Forbes. Then before the door was well shut, turned to his companion again.

"If she's not up to some game or another I'll eat my hat—that was what I was going to say."

Mrs Jessop shrugged her shoulders.

"My dear Kenneth," she said, munching an olive, "she is young, and I must say," a little un-

SINLESS

willingly, "immensely pretty; you left her quite alone for a big slice of her life and a bigger one of yours, and she's got so used to perfect freedom, that she does not understand anything else. You don't mean to say," lowering her voice, "that you seriously—that you're really suspicious of—of——"

"I don't quite know what the devil I am suspicious of," declared her host with more force than politeness, "but I'm not wrong anyway, and I tell you—well, she's changed in a most extraordinary way—she's no more the same woman as on the day she came home to Bray——"

"After having missed you in town and mixing all your arrangements up through that terrible fog—yes; I remember quite well. I met her on the stairs at the Victoria Hotel as I think I told you the other day, and thought her looking very agitated then, even more so than she looks now, when really she seems ready to jump at her own shadow."

"You do mean something—you do know something—you meant it and you knew it the other day, when you were telling that story of your meeting with Ellen, and the mistake about her having stayed at the hotel with——"

"Kenneth!" Mrs Jessop's tones were severe, reproachful, a little horrified even, and her face was quite crimson. But she did not look indignant. On the contrary, she cast one nervous glance at her host, and then lowered her eyes till the scant, fair lashes made a pale fringe on her florid cheeks; and helped herself to some port, and swallowed it down quickly as though it might give her courage.

Forbes struggled out of his chair and crossed a

SINLESS

small bit of the room to lay a heavy hand on Mrs Jessop's arm.

"Don't try beating about the bush," he said. "Before Heaven, I believe I'm not suspicious for nothing. I'm sure you know more than you care to say; and I don't think it is right of you! We've known each other all our lives, pretty well, and you ought to be honest with me—you——"

"Now, Kenneth, don't excite yourself! You'll be ill—you'll work yourself into one of your tempers—well I remember them, though the last I saw was when you were not more than nine—and that sharp-eyed doctor of yours will go for me! Keep calm. I—oh, I do believe I ought, as you say, to tell you all the truth—all I do know—and—and—oh," with tearful indignation, "what was the use of my purposely avoiding you all this time—why didn't I keep away altogether—what unfortunate chance took me to that miserable place at all that day."

"What place?"

"Oh, the hotel, of course! You know as well as I do——"

"Look here," said Forbes, reaching towards the tray and helping himself liberally to sandwiches, "I mean to know all you do—this very moment, so you may as well out with it."

"And then you'll go and make a horrible row and fuss—you'll get ill again! It's all very well to say you don't—you—that there isn't any love lost between you and Nell, but you'd be the one to make twice the scene that a man who was madly in love with her would make. Oh——"

"You quite mistake me," declared Forbes. "I

SINLESS

intend to make no fuss—either now or at any time. And if you have any fear that I shall mention your name you may rest easy on that score.”

“I do think you ought to know—I do think it is a shame that you, tied by the leg as it were, at her—her—mercy one might say, should be hoodwinked as you have been. And yet, Kenneth, it is not for me——”

“But I say it is,” returned Forbes with his mouth full, and his little monkeyish eyes cruel. “It is for you to be outspoken and honest, if no one else is. I tell you I’ve had my suspicions for the past few weeks, and they’ve grown. I’m sure there’s something in that tale about the hotel—I’m sure of it, now I come to remember how wildly agitated she was at the mention of staying there again—I’m sure she’s been deliberately making a fool of me right along, and if I have not seemed to notice, it has been because I intended to watch——”

“Wait a minute, Kenneth,” Mrs Jessop interrupted nervously. “You are sure that there is no one about?—the servants wouldn’t be listening?—one cannot be too careful.”

“There’s no one about; don’t make that an excuse. You can speak as freely as you please. Now, plainly—she wasn’t alone—that night—at the Victoria. She had not any intention of meeting me (pooh! I can see it all now—she could have let me know as well as possible; she could have telegraphed to Paris to say where she was staying, as I told her!). The fog helped her as an excuse, but all the time——”

“I don’t know about her intentions, and the fog

SINLESS

helping her ; but——” and Mrs Jessop made a sort of gasping sound, as though she were trying to force words that were unwilling to come, as though she had determined suddenly, desperately, to speak, “but I do know that—she wasn’t alone.”

“Ah !” What Forbes might have said next had to be left to his hearer’s imagination, because a crumb got into his throat, and Mrs Jessop was occupied for a full two minutes in pouring him out more wine, and thumping him violently on the back, which, at intervals, and between gasps of mingled anger and pain, he told her “hurt infernally.”

“Oh, my dear Kenneth,” moaned Mrs Jessop, when he had somewhat recovered, “I’ve said it now, and I’m almost sorry I let you persuade me. It’s an awful thing—it’s going to lead to dreadful things too—I can see it will, by your whole manner, and I wish I’d had nothing to do with the affair at all. But it’s true—I found out that, for certain, and—and—a good deal more. But I must say it serves you right, in a way, for leaving a woman like Nell——”

“Fiddlesticks ! Deuce take it, Bessie, is a woman not to go straight because her husband happened to be at the other side of the world for——”

“It frequently occurs,” returned his companion, with a slight sniff. “But what are you going to do, Kenneth—what are you going to say to her—you won’t divorce her——”

Forbes laughed, quite a hearty enjoyable laugh. His eyes gleamed, and he stroked the hard hair on his face with a steady hand.

“Do ?” he repeated. “I’ve not quite made up

SINLESS

my mind yet. Divorce her? Not I! Give her the freedom she is craving for! I should be a fool! No, I told you I shan't make any fuss, I shall be remarkably quiet and calm; but," with a laugh full of intense delight, with a slight smacking of his lips, as Mrs Jessop had heard him smack them at the sight of some specially toothsome dish, "she has had her way for a good long spell—now I'm going to have mine. I'm much obliged to you for being quite honest with me. I shan't ask you any more, though as you've been on the spot and I haven't, you probably know a good deal. What you've said is sufficient. If my suspicions needed confirmation, you've confirmed them." And he leant back in his chair, seeming to forget her utterly, and leaving her to finish her slight supper in nervous haste very rare with Mrs Jessop. She wanted an excuse for escape; she dreaded to hear the sound of the opening hall door, she shuddered at the thought of meeting Nell's blue, thoughtful eyes. She could not depend upon Forbes keeping cool, and she could not be sure that he would refrain from mentioning her name, though he had promised this. She watched him for a little while, leaning back and staring into the fire, with now and again a light coming into his eyes that sent a small shiver down her back, and she told herself he could be very horrid to deal with. Then she got up, and having cast about for something to say, finally made for the door.

"I—I'm going early to-morrow, you know, Kenneth," she said hurriedly, "and I'm rather tired and I think I'll get to bed—if you don't mind being alone?"

SINLESS

No answer, and Mrs Jessop rattled the door handle a little. Either the noise or some thought roused Forbes. He turned suddenly, and made a gesture of detention.

“Hold on a minute—come back, Bessie.”

Mrs Jessop obeyed like a child.

“Did you tell me—the name of the man?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know it myself. The chambermaid whom I questioned, as you may remember I said, told me Mr and Mrs Forbes—and a piece of brazen impudence I must say I thought it!”

Forbes grinned. He stroked his beard again, reflectively, and then he said good-night in the most absent tone.

“You—you won’t mention me?” ventured Mrs Jessop on her way to the door again. “You made me tell you, and it’s not worth while to drag more people into the—the affair than——”

“I shan’t mention your name. I’ve said so.”

“Better not, I’m sure.” Then Mrs Jessop went, glancing from one side of the hall to the other, and darting as quickly as she could manage up to her own room.

Arrived there, she declined the services of the obliging maid, locked the door, and sat down on the bed to think out what had really happened.

“I always meant to give Mrs Forbes a little lift up for many a past snubbing that I’ve had to swallow,” she said to herself, “and I always intended that Kenneth should know what I knew, when the opportunity arrived. But I’d no notion

SINLESS

that it was going to arrive just now, and in the way it has. I think I played my part pretty well anyhow—I think I seemed reluctant enough to give the little hussy away!” Mrs Jessop listened for the sound of the door bell, she listened in a hazy sort of way for voices raised, or voices kept low, but sharp with anger; but no sounds came to her. And having eaten of Nell’s bread, and dwelt beneath her roof, and kissed her cheek, and betrayed her deliberately and gladly, she lay upon the luxurious bed of Nell’s providing, and told herself that she had only done her duty by poor, foolish, trusting Kenneth, and fell into a sound sleep with a fairly clear conscience.

And downstairs Forbes was going over almost every hour since his arrival in England from India.

He went back to that night, to the following day when Nell had turned up at Bray, very late. He thought so then and he thought so doubly, now. There was not a word or act of hers that he could not now recall; there was not a glance of her eyes, not an inflection of her voice that he could not bring to mind. He remembered how she had given up a good deal of the days to him, and then how she had made frequent and reasonable excuses to get away from their home; and he looked into the fire steadily now, and muttered to himself:

“Artful, designing, calculating, treacherous!” And afterwards he went over their visit to the Brandlings’ house. It was there that Forbes had first grown really suspicious. He went over every day, remembering now, little things which he had quite forgotten, or had not noticed at the time.

SINLESS

And suddenly his mind went to their first dinner beneath Lady Brandling's hospitable roof, to Brandling's history of the journey taken by himself and Forbes and Boyd from India, to his inquiries as to how the belated travellers had managed, and to Nell's unaccountable fainting fit. Forbes thought it was all clear to him now. He sat smoking and grinning grimly. No wonder she had fainted! No wonder she had behaved in so extraordinary a manner from Hedlam to London; no wonder she was ready to jump, as Mrs Jessop said, at her own shadow! No wonder her health was failing, and she was in a state of nerves bordering on madness—no wonder at anything. With such a conscience as hers it was marvellous that she could look anyone in the face.

There was not a trace of anger in the chuckle in which Forbes indulged; there was a sort of savage delight. Something he was thinking of evidently pleased him well. And presently, when the door opened to admit Nell, she stopped dead in surprise at the spectacle of her husband quietly laughing to himself with enjoyment that she could never remember him to have displayed before.

"So you've come back?" he said as she advanced, "I begun to think you had eloped."

"I went to see Dr Oswald."

"What the dickens for?"

"Because he said he should not be here to-night, and—and—my—head seemed to get worse. The—the—little drive did me good."

The only response Forbes made was a grunt, and then that maddening little chuckle which made Nell fear he was going out of his mind.

SINLESS

"What amuses you?" she could not help asking.

"Life—it used not, but it does now. I was thinking how powerfully glad I am that I discovered Oswald, or that Gratwicke discovered him for me. I was beginning to realise as I sat here alone—Mrs Jessop went to bed almost directly we got back—we did not like the concert—that he really has made an absolutely new man of me. A month ago I wouldn't have believed it possible, but his treatment is simply too wonderful to imagine. Look at me now; I can get up and down stairs pretty nearly with the best of you—I can go to bed and sleep the clock round—I can enjoy a good play, I've even toddled to a few senseless receptions with you—and I can eat heaps of things I did not dare touch for fear of one of those villainous attacks that I simply have almost forgotten now! Everybody tells me I look years younger—except you."

"I—think you do look much better—I am very glad that you are so well, Kenneth."

"Are you? Are you really?" He looked up at her quickly, and there was something in the look that turned Nell hot and cold. "It's a funny thing, you know, Ellen—why don't you come nearer the fire?—but I'm even beginning to be able to stand women about me—I don't dislike their society as much as I did! You don't give me much of yours, but I think I must be just, and blame myself for that, eh, Nell? I've been a bit of a churl, and you've behaved very well through it all—we might start afresh? Eh? We've a good many years to make up to one another."

He paused, his head a little on one side, while

SINLESS

Nell stared back at him fascinated, in mingled wonder and fear. He was speaking quite pleasantly to her, he was even smiling! True, his smile was almost more terrible than his frown, but it was now nearly a good-humoured smile! He was talking about commencing their lives anew—he had actually called her Nell! And as that little name, that she had last heard spoken to her in the voice that rung in her ears day and night, the voice so low and tender, and so terribly, hopelessly dear to her, left his lips, she caught herself resenting as an unwarrantable impertinence the use of it now, the utterance of it, in her husband's husky tones.

And now he had risen, risen with comparative ease from his low chair; and he had covered the short distance between them, and stood close to her, so close that she could feel his breath on her soft cheek.

For a moment, she was still, dumb, incapable of stirring a finger, and in that moment his lips had almost touched hers; then, as his arm went round her shoulders, as she felt herself being drawn near to him, with a quick, half unconscious movement of utter disgust she thrust him from her, with one swift step she was at the other side of the table, her breast heaving, her lips white, her eyes ablaze.

"You're shy, my Nell!" he said as softly as his voice would admit. "It's all my fault—but I shall have to woo you all over again!"

But Nell had fled, up to her rooms, where she locked all the doors in the face of the amazed Bentley, and stood against one of them panting, wild-eyed, shaking in every limb.

SINLESS

In the room below Forbes was chuckling to himself.

"Lesson No. 1—and it's scared her almost to death!" he said half aloud.

SINLESS

CHAPTER XX

“**I** WANT to talk to you—about your wife,” said Owen Oswald, addressing Forbes late on the following evening. The doctor had only just come in, he had gone through the usual questions to and from Forbes, and he was anxious to get off his mind that which had been troubling it all through the night, all through the hours which had elapsed since Nell’s unexpected, and slightly embarrassing visit to him.

“By all means. What’s the trouble?”

Oswald kept his back to the light, and his face well in the shadow. For a moment he felt that the natural question was one which he was incapable of answering; but when he spoke it was in his most professional tone.

“She wants a thorough change——”

“I quite agree with you.”

“She—ought to go away somewhere—somewhere quiet——”

“I’ve arranged it.”

Oswald let pass unnoticed the irritating interruptions, lost for an instant in uncomfortable surprise.

“I’ve arranged it,” repeated Forbes. “I’ve been thinking a good deal about it, and her—if we don’t watch it, she’ll go into a decline, or something. You suggested a long sea voyage for me the other day you know, and I’ve come to the conclusion that

SINLESS

I'll take it, and with me my wife." Forbes was carefully trimming his nails with a penknife, and now he looked up directly into the doctor's eyes, with a curious light in his own, and a small smile beneath his moustache.

"Yes," said Oswald thoughtfully; "but I don't think I should say a sea voyage for Mrs Forbes. Now, for you," enthusiastically and hopefully, "it's the very thing—you ought to go a tour round the world. I sent young Humphrey back and forth to South Africa half-a-dozen times right off, because he could not take the whole time away without touching England, and you don't know what it did for him."

"I'm sure it would do the same for me—and for my wife——"

"Not for her—she told me that she is a fearfully bad sailor—she's not strong enough for a voyage."

"Rubbish! She's a young lion. Only she's fretting. You know what I said to you the other day about her. You have probably made up your mind that I was right—I've quite decided that I am, and that's why I'm going to take her away with me. Change of scene—no time given her to think and brood—an entirely new life in which she will forget—the old, eh?"

"I don't quite follow you."

Forbes smiled.

"I'll explain," he said. "My wife has lived a life of absolute freedom, almost from the hour of her marriage to me. I tried to tell you what I thought had been the result of that freedom the other day, and you got very heated, and you spouted verse at

SINLESS

me, and you practically declined to listen. She might have gone on living her life of freedom but for you——”

“For me!” echoed the doctor, with a tone of indignation in his voice.

“Yes, you. You’ve restored to me my health, Oswald, and with it my old good temper, my old ideas, my old tastes and inclinations. You’ve dragged off the blue glasses I’ve been looking through, and though I’m a bit past wearing rosy ones, now, I can see through the ordinary clear white ones, and I’ve got it in my mind that there are a few very decent years before me yet. You see I’m going to snatch at them—I’ve come to the conclusion that I’ve been a bit selfish, that I owe my wife a good time, and that we’ll take it together—start afresh, begin life again. You follow me now? Well, that’s why I don’t mean to go on one voyage myself while she goes on another. We’ve spent quite enough of our lives apart; now we are going to spend the rest of it together.”

Oswald set his teeth for a moment; there was nothing he dared trust himself to say, yet. Forbes was moving round the room, rather well dressed, looking brighter and better than he had ever looked before, free of his everlasting shawls, his irritating cough, free of his bag in which he had been wont to carry everything for his personal comfort, from a carbolic smoke ball to a certain kind of acid drop.

There was an interested, alert look in his monkey-like eyes, there was even a certain spring in his step. It was plain to the man who watched him now, with ungovernable regret, that he had been at last taken

SINLESS

completely out of himself, by a means which no doctors in the whole world would ever have discovered ; and that being so, he was indeed the new man which he described himself.

While he had sat huddled up in shawls, while he had guarded himself like the most tender of hot-house plants, while he had lived his life stived up in one unhealthy atmosphere, a prey to the miserable fear of all his imaginary ailments, he was truly a sufferer, and one whose life, as he lived it, could not possibly be a long one.

But Oswald had laughed and almost chaffed him out of his fears, he had proved to him that there was little the matter, save that which grew out of his distorted fancy, and Forbes had believed him, had profited by every word of his advice, because that advice came at a moment when it coincided exactly with his own desire. With the growth of suspicion of his wife in his mind, Forbes forgot himself, forgot his personal fears, forgot all his ailments, in watching her, in endeavouring to fathom the reason for that change which had come over her.

Oswald told himself that the result was fatal. In other circumstances he would have regarded it with the eye of pride, he would have looked upon Forbes' recovery as another scalp, another step up the ladder of fame. Now he looked upon it with intense regret, with fear, with a feeling of utter helplessness creeping over him which he could never remember having experienced before.

"Of course I cannot dispute your arrangements," Oswald managed to say at last. "You've spoken of them to Mrs Forbes?"

SINLESS

"Not yet. I'm keeping it a secret—for a nice little surprise for her. You suggested a voyage round the world, remember—I'll adopt the suggestion I think."

"I didn't suggest it for her. You've been good enough to admit that I've pulled you through so far; you think my advice sound—why not take it when I give it you for her? She won't stand the strain of travel, I give you fair warning."

"For once I think I'm the better doctor, then," laughed Forbes quite good-humouredly, "but we'll ask her."

He went out into the hall and told a servant there to send upstairs for Mrs Forbes. And five minutes later Nell came down looking the very ghost of herself, seeming to find difficulty in standing without support.

Though all the day had passed, she and her husband had not met since the previous night, when she had fled from him and his new mood in sheer terror. Mrs Jessop had departed with some haste, contenting herself gladly enough with Nell's good-bye message delivered by a servant; and Forbes had chosen to leave his wife quite to herself.

But now he looked from her to Oswald with quick, scrutinising eyes, and observed, though he appeared to see so little, that instinctively, unconsciously, she made her way to the side of the younger man, her eyes lifted to his in desperate appeal that she tried vainly to disguise, her fingers clinging to his, for the one moment in which he held them in a short hand clasp.

"You look pasty, Ellen," her husband said, going

SINLESS

back to something of his harshness of manner, and using her name in its most unattractive form in the way she preferred to hear it on his lips. "I've just been talking about you with Oswald; he thinks you want a thorough change." Nell kept her eyes lowered lest the gratitude in them should become perceptible to her husband—gratitude to the doctor. And she seated herself with a touch of weariness, and leant forward with her arms resting on her knees. Forbes was supposed to be a most unobservant man, but one thing he had noticed particularly during the time he had devoted to watching his wife. It was that never now, was she at that perfect ease which had surely been one of her chief charms. He remembered that he had often accused her, in his own graceful way, of "lolling," but to himself he was bound to admit that it had been very graceful lolling. She never lolled now. She always sat forward with her elbows on her knees, she had a trick of putting herself behind a chair, or a table, she selected the least conspicuous position everywhere—she who had been amused to see crowded round her a little throng of admirers.

Always it seemed to him that she had a desire to cringe away out of sight. Forbes told himself it was her conscience, and indulged in a little audible chuckle which made his wife look up quickly.

"He thinks you want a thorough change," repeated Forbes, "and I agree with him. I propose a voyage round the world—just you and I—as sort of extended, long deferred honeymoon. What?" Nell went to the pallor of death. Her eyes sought Oswald's, and he kept his back to her; then they

SINLESS

rested on Forbes, and he kept his head slightly on one side, and plainly waited her reply.

"I couldn't go," she said in desperation, having pinned her faith to Oswald, and realised that he was evidently going to fail her, "I hate travelling—I hate to be on the sea! I am never well in London, but—but—I would rather stay here, or when you go away let me go home again to Bray. Don't bother me about it, Kenneth," her colour and her voice rising a little, "I won't go for a long journey. I wish," petulantly, "you would leave me in peace."

"You are a very extraordinary woman, Ellen. I'm trying to do what will be best for you, and you don't like it."

"Mrs Forbes is a bad sailor," put in Oswald. "I must confess that I think you would do better to go alone, Forbes; you want to devote this first journey entirely to carrying out my instructions while you are away; you ought not to have any outside anxieties."

"You've been down on my thinking of myself, like a ton of bricks, till now," complained Forbes, but very quietly, "and you said, yourself, not a week ago, that my wife was the very companion who——"

"Mrs Forbes is, I am sure, the most charming companion in the world," declared Oswald, with a slight bow in Nell's direction; "but you mistook me a little I think—I'd—I'd like, if I could manage it, to go this journey with you myself, perhaps not quite so long a one for the first time, but——"

"Well, think it out. Of course if Ellen is going to set herself against it from the start and get upset

SINLESS

and disagreeable, I'm best off without her ; but I don't quite fancy going off with no one but Worth. There is no hurry anyway—time is our own ; at least I and my wife need not stop to trouble about it." He seemed inclined to dismiss the subject then, and Oswald encouraged him ; and presently while Nell sat silent, and the men talked, a message came for Forbes, which took him out of the room.

Directly they were quite alone, Oswald came over to Nell's side.

"I did my best," he said low and hurriedly. "You do not think so perhaps, but, I swear to you, I did. It would have been simple madness to seem to thwart him openly, he's as obstinate as a hundred mules, and moreover there's something at the back of this new manner of his. I suspect the woman who was staying here——"

"Mrs Jessop !" murmured Nell. alarmed.

"Yes—I'm certain I am right too. I'll tell you why, and something more if you can contrive to see me alone. And meantime you must not be in a hurry—you must give us all time——"

"Time !" she breathed aghast. "Oh, don't you understand that the hours, the days, the weeks seem to romp round, to me, that——"

"Never mind what 'seems.' The days won't go a whit more quickly to oblige anyone. I shall leave you now, but I'm coming back later, and if you can manage a headache that will necessitate a visit from me," smiling, "so much the better." He moved to the other side of the room just as Forbes returned, and then left husband and wife together.

"Well, now Oswald's gone, tell me your real ob-

SINLESS

jection to coming away with me," Forbes said, standing close to her chair, "for of course it is something more than a mere dislike to the sea."

"It is," returned Nell, getting up and facing him from the other side of the mantelpiece. "I will be quite honest with you, Kenneth——"

"Ah!" The soft exclamation was so slight that Nell did not hear it. It had come to her suddenly to speak, some power stronger than her will seemed forcing every word from her pale lips.

"I—something you said last night—something you said again just now made me think—made me realise that we could—could—never take up our lives again as—as——" colouring hotly to the roots of her pretty hair, "I think you meant you would wish to take it up. I—it sounds uncivil, hard—but I think we have lived too long apart to—to—Oh, won't you understand me? You have never seemed to care for my society, you have shown me plainly that you cared nothing for me, except as someone better than a servant to wait on you, and bear with your moods; you never pretended that—that there was any affection in our matrimonial bargain, and I have been more than content that it should be so——"

"More than content! Which means that under no circumstances could I have roused within you any affection for me."

"Yes; that is what I mean," she returned, with lowered eyes that saw nothing of the mingling of cruelty, determination, and wounded vanity in his. "You know what your own words were on—on—the day when you first came home. 'We can be as

SINLESS

good friends now as when the seas divided us.' I—I—don't think from what our lives have been since, that we have even been very good friends, and I am very sure that we were happier far when the seas did divide us."

"Speak for yourself, Ellen."

"I speak for you too. You know I speak truth—you know that almost every word and act of mine jars upon you. Why then should—you—should—you——"

"Desire to change our mode of life? With restored health I have lost some of the selfishness that made me blind to the injustice that I was——"

"If you are thinking of injustice to me," she broke in swiftly, "forget it—be unjust—or if you think you owe me any consideration now, show it by—by—going your way and leaving me to go mine——"

"I don't think I quite understand you," said Forbes with some severity, sinking into a chair and regarding her with disapproving, amazed eyes. "There was a time when it occurred to me that you might become over-demonstrative, over-affectionate. Can it be possible that you are suggesting that we should—er—separate?"

Into Nell's eyes, troubled as they were, there crept the ghost of a smile at his words; but she answered very gravely:

"I do mean that. I want it more than anything. It can profit you nothing to keep me at your side; and when you speak as—as—you spoke last night—you do it to punish me, for your sport of the moment, because, I think, you have the desire to be cruel to me."

SINLESS

"That is an extremely amiable spirit as well as rather a novel one in which to take the offer of a man's affection, but it is very like you, Ellen. And so your desire is for a separation? That we shall mutually agree to part? I've a mind to give you your way."

Nell was wise enough to make no reply, to show nothing of the gladness that came with his words into her heart. "We need have no scandal—one thing I would never put up with, and that is filling your neighbours mouths with plenty they haven't thought of already, to say about you—understand that, Ellen! I'm going this journey because Oswald insists that it will be the crowning of the cure he has already made, and you, since you prefer, can go home again—I don't see why not. Possibly," with an odd smile, "I shall be grateful to you in the long run for having declined to take me in earnest in a softer mood."

"You—you mean it?" asked Nell slowly.

"Pah! Yes; of course I mean it. Do you suppose I want to trot a woman round with me with a face like a wet week? Do you suppose I want it dinned into my ears day and night that you are ailing? Somebody who is strong and capable and—and—amusing is the sort of companion I need if I'm ever going to get really well again; and if Oswald like to take the trip, you can stay at home and welcome—whether he takes it or not, so far as that goes. But as for going our separate ways for all time—I'll have to think it over. I don't mean to be made the laughing-stock of all my friends and yours just for a whim of yours. Now if you'll send

SINLESS

Worth to me I'll have my evening nap before Oswald gets back."

He turned away as he spoke, and Nell, with an inaudible murmur of thanks went out of the room. She would not look too far into the future; she would be content with the slight victory of the present.

"Lesson No. 2," smiled Forbes to himself. "Oswald seems to back her for some peculiar reason. I think I shall be doing well to give her a loose rein for the present. By Jove!"

SINLESS

CHAPTER XXI

IT was with a very wan little face, and eyes that told of a sleepless night, that Nell came downstairs about noon next day in answer to a message sent to her by Doctor Oswald.

"I did not think," he said, advancing to meet her and holding both her hands in the firm, kindly clasp from which lately she had learned to gain courage, "that the worst headache you could have had or invented last night would have been of any avail; and I knew that we should have an opportunity for a chat to-day—so I came up early. Now tell me, what has happened?"

"Don't you know? Hasn't he—told you?"

Oswald drew a chair nearer the fire for her, and stood himself, with his broad shoulders against the edge of the mantelpiece.

"Forbes hasn't said a word about you to me since last evening—you heard all that was said then. He has rather hurried off this morning to his solicitor's, and that means that he will be absent for at least two hours."

Nell clasped and unclasped her fingers over each other and turned restless eyes from the doctor's face to the fire. She had gone through agonies of anxiety and uncertainty, she had passed long hours of misery and bewilderment, and now she was experiencing a foolish longing to let the tears that had

SINLESS

been so near at hand for many days, have their way and flow freely. With an effort she gulped down an uncomfortable lump in her throat, and looked up at Oswald again.

"When you had gone—yesterday," she said, speaking very low, 'I—I—told him plainly that I could not and would not take this trip which he proposes to take himself. I gave him the reason too—not that I disliked travel, not that I minded the sea—nothing trivial, and easily overcome like that. What was the use? What was the good of continual excuse that I could not keep up? Oh," miserably, "I have had so much of it—I have grown weary of the lies and the deception——"

"You don't mean that you told him——"

"I told him that I was unhappy, I told him that we had spent too many years apart ever to live happily together. I said I wanted him to go his way and to let me go mine."

"And he?" questioned Oswald quickly.

"He seemed after a moment's astonishment, after a little time taken up in utter amazement, to agree. It is that which has worried me all through the night, though it is that which I wanted. I can't get it out of my head that he has some reason, some motive—I can't believe that he would give me my way in anything that was not his way—and after what you said to me—after I had thought for a little while—oh, what do you think he means to do?"

Her voice had risen a little, she was speaking rather incoherently and wildly now; and the man leaning forward touched her gently on the shoulder.

"Don't upset yourself—pray don't. That you

SINLESS

have gained a point is surely something. First let us remember that he has agreed to take his trip alone, or whatever it is that he is going to do, and that he means to let you remain behind. That surely simplifies matters a good deal. As for his motive—if he has one, if there's any card up his sleeve that he thinks of playing in the long run, Heaven alone knows what it is. All you can do is to make the most of the time given you. I hinted to you that I believe he suspects something, and that that most unpleasant person whom you had staying here, Mrs Jessop, is responsible for most of his suspicions, though they were partly formed before she came on the scene. I am going to be quite candid with you—he told me so.”

Nell made a little sound that was something between a sob and a sigh, but she did not speak ; she seemed anxious only to hear all that Oswald had to tell her.

“He said nothing very definite,” pursued the young doctor, “he merely suggested that you had formed some attachment—that is his own word—during his absence, and he was convinced that your failing health is due to the fact that you are fretting. I rather jumped upon him for the manner in which he expressed himself,” added Oswald with a touch of heat in his tones, even now, at the recollection, “and he said little or nothing more, finding that I was not a good listener. Altogether I confess he puzzles me a good deal. He,” looking away from her, “seemed anxious that you should take this trip with him ; he expressed himself desirous of starting life afresh, as it were, with you at his side ; he put

SINLESS

on something of the regretful, remorseful air, that I'll swear he was far from feeling, and talked about making up to you for the past, during the future good years he might have——”

“I know,—I know,” she broke in, with a little wail that held a piteous touch of fear. “It was that which decided me, that which brought me more fear than I have known yet. He cares no more for me than for the greatest stranger who passes him in the street, and yet he was feigning to—to—wish that we should take up our lives together on—on—different lines. It was that which made me tell him honestly, plainly, that whatever his wishes, mine were for a separation, mine were that we might part and—not meet again.”

“And yet he agreed to that in spite of all he had said to me and to you?” said Oswald, a deep frown wrinkling his forehead.

“He agreed to my remaining at home whilst he went away, as for the rest—he would not say.”

“Tell me this,” said the doctor suddenly. “How much does that woman know—how much can she?”

“Nothing—or practically nothing.”

“But when she met you as she described in that story, which I felt convinced at once, she was telling with a purpose—when she saw you at the hotel—?”

“I was just leaving. She gleaned all her information from the hotel servants—I——”

“She saw no one else—she knew no names?”

Nell grew red as the heart of a rose, and then white as the palest lily, and her face was turned from him for a long moment, while her mind went back to that

SINLESS

morning long ago, when the bewildered servants had stood before Boyd while he had given an order for his luggage to be fetched from the station. And she remembered, too, how afterwards, he had almost proved to her that that order had been scarcely noticed, and his name certainly unheeded. How, when Mrs Jessop had seized upon her at the top of the stairs, Boyd had quietly stepped aside, mingling with others who were passing along the corridor; and how she, Nell, had fled with all possible haste downstairs and out into the street.

“To the best of my knowledge and belief, she knows nothing, save that I was there—and not alone.”

“She has managed to give the information to Forbes anyhow, in a manner that makes it quite sufficient; but I don’t quite see why he is hiding his knowledge, such as it is from you. Do you?”

“I do not—except that I think he is a man who would choose the punishment for me that he thought would be most lasting and cruel. And yet he has agreed to my wishes—in part; and that is why I am convinced that he has some object——”

“Never mind; we must battle with that after. He will expect me to go away with him, and I shall do it.”

“But can you spare the time? Oh! why should you do this all for me?”

He looked down upon her, quizzically, for a moment, and there came into his eyes and upon his lips the whimsical, half smile that had always puzzled her.

“Where will you go?” was all he said.

“Home first; and—and after,” lowering her

SINLESS

voice to almost a whisper, "away, altogether, where no one will ever find me." Oswald nodded. He did not say how well he understood the difficulties of carrying out such a plan. Let her be happy and at ease in the thought that she would be able to do it; let her have this brief time of hope at least. He knew if he asked it of her she would tell him all there was to know; but somehow he felt no inclination to be wiser than he was already. What he did feel was keen mistrust of Forbes, and a feverish desire to see that he had no time to go back on what amounted to the promise he had evidently made his wife, last night.

"I wish I'd never laid eyes on the man," he murmured with savage impatience, "or else I wish I'd never tried to get him out of the fads that kept him the half invalid he imagined himself."

"And then," said Nell, rising and resting a timid little hand on his arm, "you would never have laid eyes on me, and you would not have helped and comforted me as you have now."

"I should have seen you," he smiled, sorry now that he read the distress in her lovely tired eyes, "because of our meeting long ago. For Heaven's sake don't think that I meant any regret that our paths in life had crossed. I am greatly a believer in Fate—it was meant to be. And as for the rest, if I have comforted you at all and helped you even a little I am very glad, well satisfied. Poor little thing," he added suddenly. "Poor frail child! I wonder if anyone was ever in so hopeless a position? In all my experience, and it is a varied one, I can assure you, I was never landed into a situation with

SINLESS

which at moments I felt so helpless to grapple, and at other moments so strong to fight. Leave the arrangements principally to me. If anyone can keep your husband to his present mood it is I."

"And you will tell me all that you are going to do—all that you do? I—I—there will be times when I shall see you? Oh, I think I should feel more terribly alone than ever if I did not see you sometimes, hear from you often. You have been such a friend as one might dream of—not such as one ever meets. Ah, don't you see, that I know it is all pity in your heart, and never censure—it is all more than I deserve, like your kindness, but it is none the less sweet. And I shall never be able to thank you, I shall never be able to prove to you what I feel."

He still held her hands gently in his, and now he smoothed the soft backs in a half-hesitating way.

"You are aware how little I really know, but you are also well aware that it is all I desire to know," he said, smiling down at her. "I give my advice only when you ask it, I urge you to nothing you do not wish to do, but this I must still say—there is one, surely, and one only, who has the right to stand between you and trouble, one who should fight your battles for you. You mean to do what is right and best, you are sacrificing all your youth, all your life to that end. But if—if—he was ever worth your love, if that love is what I think it to be, shared as it is by such a woman as you—no vulgar, transient passion, no wanton wrong, no common intrigue—I tell you to ask yourself if you are fair and just to him for whom——"

SINLESS

"Don't—" she murmured with a little pleading glance more sad than bitter tears. "I had almost fought against the temptation you seem to hold out to me, successfully—but all the time I know, none better, how pitifully weak I am."

"But if you will only think—what is to be the end——?"

"I don't know—it is with the present, and the very near future that I am fighting now, and you are helping me to fight. After——" and her eyes grew dreamy with a hope that he understood, and that struck him as terribly pathetic—"after—there may be death for me very soon."

He did not answer. He even thought that she might be right. In his mind he likened her to some rare, tender blossom, that, handed over to a rough, careless gardener, is thrust into the glare of light and the violence of the cold wind; that blooms proudly for a little while, and when all have gazed upon its sweetness, is left to droop and to wither, and presently to die.

But he said nothing of his thought; he was silent, and Nell thought, with a little pang of fear, and yet a throb of joy at her heart, that perhaps he had guessed, too, that her life would be but a short one now. But when they parted, the gravity had died out of his merry eyes.

"Don't talk of death, my dear," he said. "Look forward rather to the life that will hold more for you than it has ever held yet."

SINLESS

CHAPTER XXII

SUMMER had come once more, and with it, heat such as is rarely felt in England. To-day it streamed down pitilessly upon one of the prettiest houses in Wimbledon, in one of the widest and best kept roads, and though standing in very pleasant grounds, rather painfully close to the town. Its mistress did not think it too close, she did not think it could be improved in any way ; but its master experienced great difficulty in regarding his surroundings without his nose slightly turned up in the air, and a glance of disgust creeping into his eyes. Against these evidences of distaste he fought manfully, and, on the whole, pretty successfully ; and now as he believed himself to be quite alone in possession of the drawing-room that was literally packed with treacherous Geisha footstools, and spindly tables waiting to be knocked over, with screens in front of both doors, and before everything that a screen could be put before, and with fringed draperies that caught one on all sides like nets, he gave a long sigh, and looked out upon the trim little garden where the flowers were drooping their brilliant heads in the heat, with all the misery and disgust, all the helplessness and hopelessness in his eyes that were surging in his heart.

Two plump little hands were suddenly flapped across his eyes, someone stood on tip-toe behind him

SINLESS

to hold them there, and someone also blew warmly in his ear, a little amused laugh.

“What a poor old martyr you did look, Ken!” declared Boyd’s wife, removing her hands now and coming round to face him. “You were turning up your nose at the swamped lawn, and looking as though you thought geraniums vulgar, and you kicked my best new chair half across the room when you entered. Why do you come in here, if you don’t like it?”

“I expect it’s to fall over or break something,” Boyd admitted easily. “I don’t think I ever saw a room so jammed full of stuff in my life.”

“You’re used to India, my dear, where, I’ve heard, the rooms are absolutely bare. Not for me, thank you—I like comfort, and pretty things about me. I came to find you to ask how soon you’ll be ready to go away, if you are going with me. You know I always go to the seaside every summer with the Gordon-Smiths——”

“That woman with the seven tow-headed children who squint, and——”

“That very woman, and the children too. They’re sweet little things when you know them. Well, last year it was Margate, this year it’s to be Yarmouth—where the bloaters come from, you know. Give me a good all round happy-go-lucky place, say I, where one can do as one likes and see the kiddies have a jolly good time. We go about the end of July, because the children don’t break up till the twenty-eighth; and what I’m after you for, is that we want to decide about the rooms we shall take. We have some good lodgings—where they don’t mind noise

SINLESS

and there's nothing to spoil, you know ; and Mr Gordon-Smith comes down every Friday till Monday. You could do the same, or as you've no business to keep you in town, come down altogether."

"One moment, Helen," entreated Boyd, who could scarcely repress a smile, though he felt anything but pleased. "You rattle on so fast that I do not quite grasp all you mean. Is it that you seriously think of me going away with you in company with Mrs Gordon-Smith and her large family?"

"Why not? You could have a separate sitting-room if you liked, but it would be waste of money. We're out best part of the day, and——"

"My dear girl, I'm willing to go away with you to-morrow, but for Heaven's sake let it be to some decent place and alone."

"Not a bit of it, Ken! I'm going my old way, and you can join us or not, as you please. You're not such lively company, dear, that I can stand the holiday by ourselves. Don't mind me, and I shan't mind you. That's the way to be truly happy though married," with a jolly little laugh.

"I'm really very sorry," began Boyd, who would have endured almost any torture rather than hurt anyone's feelings.

"Don't be. Look here, Ken, you came home in November, and this is July—eight months—and you've not spent more time here than you could possibly help. I don't blame you—I told you long ago that you would never drop into Wimbledon ways. The question is, What will you do? Stay here with one of the servants and the boy, or——"

SINLESS

"I think I'll go up to Scotland with Mead and Brandling and——"

"Capital," broke in Mrs Boyd. "How I did like young Brandling—such a nice-looking jolly boy! He never came to see me as he promised, though. Then that's settled, and you won't tackle Yarmouth and help to amuse the Gordon-Smith children. Oh, and talking of Captain Brandling, reminds me of those people I met there—you know the Forbeses—I heard something of them the other day, and I've always been going to ask you if you've seen anything of them."

"Nothing," returned Boyd, his face growing hard, and all the life dying out of his voice. He kept his eyes upon the flooded lawn, and wished with all his heart he had not come into this room at all.

Then, because he hoped to silence her by giving her all the information he could, he added: "Forbes went up to town to put himself under the care of some new and clever young doctor I believe, and Brandling told me that they took a furnished house in Half Moon Street, I think; but then we, Mead and I, were away you know, and as you reminded me just now, I have spent very little time here—and—and—I seldom touched London, so I suppose I missed them."

The information and his speech were hurried, even sufficiently impatient to arrest Mrs Boyd's attention.

"You never liked them much, did you, Ken? Especially Mr Forbes—she was rather a nice little woman I thought. Had rather a 'dashed superior air,' but on the whole she wasn't bad. It was Edith

SINLESS

Walker who was telling me about them the other day—I think there's some bit of a mystery. Edith is governess to a Mrs Jessop's nieces, and it was there she heard all about it. She'd heard me speak of the Forbeses and so she thought I should be interested—which I was. Well, Mr Forbes put himself in this doctor's hands, and came out simply a juvenile again! Then he went some long journey—he's on it still—and his wife declined to accompany him, it is believed. At all events she didn't go; and it appears that there was some quarrel which ended in a sort of mutual separation. Mrs Jessop, Edith says, declares that she wasn't altogether so goody-goody as she might have been, and her husband found it out—Edith thinks, if anyone told him, it was Mrs Jessop herself, who's a regular old scandalmonger—but anyhow he went off in a huff, and she went back to her home in Bray——”

“Which is surely no one's business but their own,” put in Boyd in a wild endeavour to bring an end to information that was painful to him in the extreme.

“Oh, I don't know,” remarked his wife easily. “When people do things right under other people's noses, they can't expect to keep anything their own business—it's public property. But the curious part and the best of it is to come. Mrs Forbes after a little while it seems, shut up the home altogether, and disappeared—nobody knew or apparently cared, where. But Edith Walker, who used to live at Maidenhead with the Courcys, and knows Mrs Forbes well by sight, tells me that who should she meet the other day in a little out-of-the-way village right in

SINLESS

the wilds of Northumberland—it was while Edith was taking her holiday—but the very woman herself——”

“You mean Mrs Forbes?” asked Boyd, with what he greatly feared were white lips.

“Of course I do—how stupid you are, Ken. And not only that, but Edith was curious, and found out that she is living there under the name of Mrs Francis—and if all accounts are true,” and Mrs Boyd’s little fat body was shaking with amusement, “when poor Mr Forbes does return, he’ll find himself a proud father—good heavens! Kenyon! There goes my Dresden wheelbarrow—you’ve broken it!” Boyd did not hear. He had turned round so sharply, with a cry that a man might utter if he had received his death wound, that he had overset one of the room’s many tables, and with it the costly ornament that had stood upon it. But he did not know what he had done. He only realised in a vague, hazy sort of way that something was damaged, something had happened to distress his wife very much; something that sent her down upon her knees, mopping the floor, and picking up bits of broken china, with every now and again a fresh exclamation of dismay, of annoyance that ended in a very sob of grief.

He saw her as one sees something in a dream, he heard her wailings as if from afar off. To his strained ears, through the blind tangle of his mind, there came but one distinct, clear sound and that was the sound of the words she had spoken before the table had mercifully gone over with a crash.

“It’s broken—you’ve smashed it!” she declared sorrowfully, and added with some indignation,

SINLESS

“and you stand there as though nothing had happened.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Boyd, coming out of his terrible dream with a tremendous effort, and stooping to pick up some of the pieces. “It was exceedingly clumsy of me, but I will get you another—half-a-dozen more if you like—I have seen any amount of them about—I——” And then not trusting himself to say another word, he bolted from the room, almost oversetting several other little tables and a screen, and finally dashing through first the curtain-hung door, and then the hall one, which the parlour-maid held open with considerable haste and presence of mind.

And Mrs Boyd, rising with difficulty from her knees looked across the closely-clipped hedge of which she was immensely proud, and saw him tearing down the street in the direction of the town.

“Silly !” she remarked to herself crossly, “now he’s rushing off to get another one, and he won’t find its match in a week’s hunt !”

But Boyd was not intent upon matching china. He had utterly forgotten the smash already. He was dashing through the crowded town instinctively searching for some spot where he could be alone, out of sight, out of the reach of anyone’s voice, beyond the possibility of hearing any more of “Edith Walker’s” scandal, as repeated by Mrs Boyd.

A man shrieked something in his ear about prime bacon, another outside a butcher’s shop invited him to step in and buy ; an impatient nursemaid, who was carrying on a mild flirtation with a discreet

SINLESS

policeman, smacked a baby hard because it would not sit still in the mail-cart.

Boyd regarded one after the other in a vague uncertain way, disgust in his eyes, haste in his movements, which drew upon him the attention of all and the wonder of many. But he pushed on through the crowd of women and perambulators and dogs, until he reached the top of the hill, and till the wide, quiet stretch of common lay invitingly before him. Here was silence at least; here he could be quite alone with his thoughts. He went on and on, and presently threw himself down upon a seat that someone had fashioned out of a tree trunk, on which any amount of people had cut their names and their ages and all kinds of brief information about themselves. And here he lifted his hat to the breeze, and his eyes, that had lost all their brightness long ago, and that were now blind to the searching sun, up to the sky, as if from the blue vault above he could gain some comfort, even some hope.

And he went over and over again the information he had received to-day, not half-an-hour ago, and repeated the words his wife had said, aloud, as though he could not be sure he had heard them till they were spoken in his own voice.

How long he remained there he never knew, how long he sat with his hands sunk in the palms of his hands he did not heed. No one came near him—not a living soul; he had all the brilliant afternoon, and all the closing evening to himself, to give up to a thought, a certainty, that he felt must drive him mad. And when the shades of evening had

SINLESS

closed in about him, when far above the tree tops he could see the little crescent of the moon hanging like a curved thread of silver in an opal sky, Boyd rose, and made his way in the direction of the town again. The soft breeze stirring among the leaves seemed to sigh to him almost the last words he had heard in Nell's voice, the tender, passionate avowal that he had wrung from her, and the memory of which was all he had had to treasure. Here in the silence and the dim light, he could hear her pretty plaintive voice again, he could feel the pressure of her sunny head against his aching heart, the warmth of her lips on his own. He had treasured every word that she had whispered to him, he had heard in them all the love and the faith to himself that he had longed to hear, but he had not understood them as he understood them now; he had not gathered the sense of them as he did at this moment with mingled joy and fear, and bitter, futile self-reproach, and passionate pitying tenderness.

"In heart and mind and thought and act, I am yours, surely, irrevocably—in so much more than you may ever guess or you may ever know!" She had said to him, and he had heard all the love, only, that those words had spoken and none of the fear and the despair that must have been hers. And she was alone—more terribly, hopelessly alone than any woman had ever yet been in all the world. She was hidden away in a miserable little village in the wilds of the dreary country, among strangers, with none near to comfort or care for her. She was alone when he should have been living his life only to bring the sunshine into hers.

SINLESS

"My God!" he thought, while his heart seemed to stand still for a moment, "what she must have gone through—what she must have endured—and I, fool that I was, did as I thought she wished, and went deliberately out of her life!"

It was late when he reached his home; dinner was a thing of the past, and an indignant parlour-maid was preparing to bring to him the warmed remains; and Mrs Boyd met him at the door with surprise written all over her hot, fat little face.

"You really are too silly!" was her greeting. "Fancy tearing all over the place at once to match that thing! Have you been to London and all—what a goose you are, Ken! I didn't wait dinner, because I never dreamed you'd come in to it, when you were so long; but there's plenty left. Hurry cook up, Dawson!"

"I'm sorry," said Boyd desperately, "I'd no idea a thing of that sort would be so hard to get—you will have to have something else, Helen." He sat down and sipped some iced soup gratefully, and declining claret, poured himself out a brandy and soda, which made his wife stare hard at him, to notice for the first time that he was extremely worn looking and pale.

"Poor old fellow!" she said inwardly. "Done up, tearing all over the place to please me!" Aloud—"Nothing wrong, Ken?"

"Only the heat," he returned, and felt he was lying beautifully. In the two minutes it had taken him to swallow his soup, he had come to a sudden decision; and he felt the better for it already. "I've seen Mead. I think as you're off to the sea-

SINLESS

side, and I shall only be in the way of packing and that sort of thing, I'll be off too, at once."

"You won't be in my way—but just as you like," returned Mrs Boyd with her usual good-humour. "Edith Walker is coming in for a little music presently, but——"

"Nothing more, thank you," said Boyd in a rather loud voice to the servant. "There's an up train at nine: I think I'll take that, Helen."

SINLESS

CHAPTER XXIII

IT was not till the following afternoon that Boyd was able to leave London, and then he found that he had only just time to make the half-past two train at King's Cross for Alnwick. He had made Alnwick his headquarters because he remembered that on the rare occasions when he had listened to his wife's chatter concerning "Edith Walker" he had heard that her home was at a very small village called Leathway at a distance of some seven or eight miles from the town. It was Edith Walker who had met Nell; it was she who had described that meeting as having taken place in a little out-of-the-way village in the wilds of the country, and it was during her holiday, undoubtedly spent in her own home, that it had happened.

Boyd did not fancy himself in the detective line at all; but he had made up his mind to find Nell without delay, and having profited by the information which had been forced upon him, he put two and two together from Miss Walker's report, and decided that it should be the village in which her home lay to which he would first direct his attention.

"I know the sort of place," he had said to himself, when making his plans on the previous night. "One little street, three shops, and half-a-dozen houses at the most. A stranger would be remarked and

SINGLESS

remembered. There would not be much difficulty in finding her ! Poor child ! Does she think the mere burying of herself away in that isolated spot will hide her from the eyes of the world ? ”

The journey was the longest one Boyd had ever known ; he looked out upon the country with impatient yet thoughtful eyes, and it never once struck him as odd that he remembered nothing but the object of this journey, that he had no thought of what would be the result. For a long time there seemed to be only one clear idea to him, and that was that he had come to find Nell. It might be an easy matter or it might be a very difficult one ; but it was all he could think of now. It was the present to which he devoted himself ; the future would and should take care of itself.

When he arrived it was nearly midnight ; with ever-increasing impatience he realised that there was nothing to be done till the morning.

Sleep was very far from him ; after a long restless night it was with a sigh of relief that he watched the dawn breaking, it was with a great effort only that he managed to keep to his room till anything like a respectable hour.

By nine o'clock he was on his way to the little village of Leathway. He walked, for choice ; and he made inquiries as to the roads he must take, from several people who appeared to be either intensely stupid or loth to give information. And when at last he had reached what he was told was Leathway, Boyd stood looking about him and telling himself that there were not even the three shops and half-a-dozen houses which he had ex-

SINLESS

pected. There seemed to be nothing, nobody near him. Afar off in the fields he could see men and boys and here and there a few women at work ; dotted about were one or two cottages plainly belonging to the workers ; in the hollow, at the bottom of the hill down which he looked, now, with eyes screwed up against the dazzling sun, there were a few more houses, a flat building that perhaps was the one shop, and what might be a school or a small church.

He went down the hill, wondering if this really were Leathway, where Edith Walker could have lived.

"There must be a mistake," he said to himself, and hailed an old man who was coming leisurely towards him.

"Is this Leathway ? " Boyd inquired, raising his voice because the man looked as though he might be deaf.

"Who'm ye shoutin' at ? "

"I beg your pardon—is it Leathway ? "

"It *may* BE——"

"I know it may be," impatiently, "but is it ? "

"'Um," said the man in a tone that might have meant yes or no, and walked on.

Boyd, though annoyed, could not help smiling.

He stopped a small boy next.

"Is this Leathway, my lad ? "

"Yis."

"Is this all of it ? "

"Yis."

"Er—do you know anyone here by—by the name of Francis—a lady, a stranger ? "

SINLESS

"Naw. It may be there be naw strangers this part."

"Thank you." Boyd presented him with a sixpence and sat down on the top bar of a gate a little hopelessly. There were only four houses, he counted them, and came to the conclusion that he had better knock at each door and extract what information he could from the occupant of each house. Presently he saw a woman come to one of the doors and stand there; and he got off the gate and went towards her. The same questions and very much the same answers passed between them; and the woman looked at him with increasing suspicion when he went to the next house. There a man spoke to him, and evidently suspecting him of spying upon someone, unceremoniously shut the door in his face.

"Of all the uncouth lot!" thought Boyd angrily, and just then met the eyes of a woman who was regarding him a little curiously. She was young, and she had a pleasant, pretty face; also she was sufficiently shy to blush at his unconsciously prolonged stare. Boyd raised his hat and stepped through the open gate of the little garden.

"I wonder if you could help me," he said, "I am looking for a lady who came I believe to stay here, and no one seems able or willing to tell me anything."

The girl smiled, revealing pretty teeth.

"What is her name?" she inquired accenting her words in an entirely different manner to her neighbours.

"Francis."

"And a lady?"

SINLESS

“Yes.”

The woman shook her head.

“There is no lady, and no one named Francis in this part,” she said. “Are you sure it was at Leathway?”

“Well, no,” he admitted, feeling suddenly that he had but slender excuse for searching for Nell here. “But she was seen here, and—and—I am very sure she could not be staying far away.”

“Bobbie!” called the woman loudly to a small boy within the house, “What is the name of the lady staying at Nurse White’s? The lady that came from London, and that you took the butter and eggs to—up near Strachan’s farm, stupid!”

“Don’t naw.”

“You do know, if you think. You said it the other day when——” Boyd produced half-a-crown and held it up to the boy’s sulky eyes.

“I wonder if that will help your memory,” he said.

“Be it Frawncis? Maybe it is—Mrs Frawncis—fra Lunnon, up to Nurse White’s.”

The coin changed hands instantly, and Boyd turned again to the woman, who blushed, angrily this time.

“A good clout side of the head ’stead of money,” she muttered; but Boyd was saying:

“I can’t thank you enough; now will you add to your kindness by directing me to Nurse White’s house?”

“’Tis the best part of four miles away. But can you see that far hill? and the little line of smoke seeming to be running up behind it? Yes? Well

SINGLESS

'tis close there. Everyone knows Nurse White, and her cottage is called 'The Rest.' She and her old sister live together—you can't miss it; and the lady you want must be there, because she's from London I know, and 'tis the first person like that that ever came to stay in these parts. She's been there this four months perhaps or near to it."

"I am very much obliged," said Boyd lifting his hat again, and passing out of the little gate, hurried along the road, the woman's wondering eyes following him.

Only a bare four miles away—only just as far as the blue line of smoke which wound slowly skyward! It must be that Nell was there—no other woman calling herself by the same name could have come to this part of the world. Only a short walk after all, and he would have found her.

The sky had grown blue again, the song of the birds cheered him on his way—it trilled forth a note of hope and love.

And by-and-by when he could no longer see the line of blue smoke in the distance, when instead, on the top of the hill, there stood before him a pretty, old-fashioned cottage, ivy-covered, and far back from the winding road, and on its rough gate-post painted the words "THE REST," Boyd came to a halt, and though he was all impatience to enter that house, to hasten up the garden path and through the door which stood wide open, he paused for many moments close by the gate, not moving a step. Then at last he went in and knocked softly. An old lady came to him.

"Is—Mrs Francis at home?" he said with a

SINLESS

quiver of half dread in his voice. What if, after all, he should be refused here ?

“ Yes, she is at home, sir—will you step in ? ”

“ Please don’t announce me,” said Boyd hurriedly and softly. “ She will see me I am sure——” There was irresistible appeal in his eyes, his face had grown very pale ; the old lady looked at him curiously yet half pitifully, and after a moment’s hesitation, pointed down the passage.

“ That door which you see right at the end of the hall is the door of Mrs Francis’ sitting-room. Mind, there are two steps, sir.”

Boyd hoped, afterwards, that he had said thank you ; he never knew. And the old lady smiled as she saw that he covered the length of the passage in almost one step—then she heard the door of Mrs Francis’ sitting-room open, and close quickly again.

SINLESS

CHAPTER XXIV

“**N**ELL !” The little name left Boyd’s lips softly, almost sadly, with a ring of passion that held all the pent-up misery of long months, yet all the mingled joy and hope and satisfaction, and longing, that were born in this moment that gave her back to him. It rung softly and clearly through the little room, and reached the woman who had been sitting by the open window with her chin sunk wearily in the palms of her hands, and her eyes looking out on to the still country, with a wealth of hopeless, helpless sadness in their blue depths—who at the sound, sprung to her feet, only to sink back again into her chair, so white, so breathless, that for one horrible moment the man thought she was dead. Before the next clock-tick he was at her side ; he had lifted her in his arms out of the chair, and she lay on his heart, still white with the pallor of death, so breathless that there was no movement of the soft breast, barely covered with the filmy lace that fell over it.

He thought he had killed her. Mad with fear he besought her to speak to him, to look at him ; he called her by every tender name at his command, he covered her eyes and hair with kisses, and sought with the warmth of his own, to bring back the colour to her livid lips.

“ Nell—look at me—speak to me ! In mercy give

SINLESS

me one word. Have I frightened you—have I hurt you? My life, my one love, look up and say you forgive me!”

She stirred then, and would have shrunk away from his hold, but he kept his arms round her, and put her gently back into the chair again, and knelt close at her side, his face pressed against her heavily-beating heart.

“Oh, why did you come—why did you?” she whispered, leaning back from him, and closing her eyes.

“Nell, look at me,” he returned, and now there was a ring of command in his voice that compelled her to obey, “look into my eyes—” he held her closer with the utterance of each word, “look into my eyes, and tell me if you do not know why I have come to you, why I would have ceased to rest day or night till I had found you. Tell me! You shall—you owe it to me for the torture of all these horrible months—you owe it to me for the knowledge you would have kept from me. Nell, how could you—how dared you! Oh, my God! if you had really cared for me, if I had been in your life what you were in mine, if——”

He paused, as though words failed him, searching her little wan face, her large troubled eyes, hungrily.

“Did you never realise,” he went on, “that you were doing me the cruellest injustice—did it never come to you that in leaving me in ignorance, in hiding yourself from me and all the world, here, in going out of *my* life, you were doing me a wrong that it might have been forever out of your power to repair? You had no right—I say you had no right

SINLESS

to do it ! You were no longer your own—you were mine ! Oh, God ! oh, love ! so much more mine than in my maddest moments of remembered joy, I had ever dreamed. You belonged to me—how dared you seek to rob me of what was mine by the greatest of all rights, the divine right of love ? ” He ceased abruptly. The force of his passion, stronger than his strength, shook his frame ; and he was silenced, weakened, by the sudden tender pressure of her arms, where he held them, close about his throat.

“ Was I so wrong ? ” she asked him piteously. “ Was I ? Can you blame me in your heart ? Can you not understand what life became to me ? Can you not imagine the terror, the utter helplessness, the terrible hopelessness of it all ? Oh, what could I do—what could I, except what I did ? ”

“ If you had loved me—” he persisted ; but she drew his head close against her heart, and the words were stifled in the laces at her breast.

“ Because I loved you—” she whispered to him, gently. “ Because I loved you better than my own happiness and my own peace of mind—because I would not tempt you with so much as a word—because I understood so well that—that—if I had—let you know—nothing, no one would have stood between us. Oh, my dear, my dear, say what you will, I had no right to your love and your care, I had no claim on your life, I——”

“ I deny it ! ” he broke in across her words, with a touch of violence in his. “ I deny it utterly—and if you will only think a moment you will own that I am right. Right, sense, justice all cry out against

SINLESS

you in such a statement. I bring upon you—in ignorance and without wrong intentionally, I grant you—but I bring upon you the keenest trouble, I, who love you with all my soul, with every beat of my heart, with all that is best and truest in me, with all the good my life has ever held. *I work the ruin of your whole life, and you try to tell me, you would try to make me believe that you have no right to my care, no claim on my life ! To whom should you go then—to whom should you turn for love and comfort ? Answer me that.*” But she could not answer. She could only yield herself to his fond embrace, only admit by her silence that she had no words wherewith to contradict him. It was so sweet to hear through every tone of his voice what the strength of his love was still ; it banished fear so completely for the moment to know that he was here, with her, to comfort and protect her. It gave her new life and courage to fully comprehend that she was no longer so terribly alone—there was such tender joy, such shy, sweet happiness in the knowledge that at last he shared the secret that she had hugged so closely and jealously to her heart.

“Answer me,” he said again, and rising, lifted her on to his heart once more. “No, you shall stay here. Do you grudge me this moment’s happiness ? Have you never thought how frightfully empty my arms have been since I was fool enough to let you out of them that day at Hedlam, only on your promise that you would see me the next day. And you broke that promise, Nell—you sent me just a bare, cold little note saying you were going to London, and never another line ! Oh, what a fool I

SINLESS

was to listen to you—what an idiot ! If I had known—if I had known,” lifting her flushed face to his, “you should never have escaped me—and I might have guessed, I might have understood, from something you said then—that I have thought of since but that I did not comprehend at the time. You broke your promise to me that day, Nell—why ?—why ? ”

“ I—we—went to town—I could not help myself,” she answered him a little faintly. “ And after, I thought it was best—and I was glad and—and—sorry too, that I—I—heard no more of you. I—bore it as long as I could—I did my best as long as I dared, and—and then—I came away—I came here. I wanted to hide away always, I did not want even you ever to find me or—or—to know, and yet—oh, my dear, I cannot be sorry for just this one hour of happiness out of all the wretched ones that have been, and all the more wretched ones that must be, when you are gone——”

“ When I am gone ! Gone ! ” he echoed, laughing softly against her throat. “ When I go, my sweetheart, you go with me.”

“ Ah, no—no—you don’t know what you say,” she cried swiftly, striving in vain to put him from her. “ Dear, be reasonable—hear me. Life has changed for us—I will admit that—it cannot be lived as—as—we did our best to live it ; but you must leave me—you——”

“ Leave you, now ! Never, my God ! I tell you that no prayer of yours, no earthly power shall part us again. When Fate brought us together we parted—we did what we both thought right and

SINLESS

best, and we were wrong. Apart, life is but half-life, together, in spite of everything, we can find happiness seldom given to any. It is our just heritage—I claim it for you as for myself, the right to live, and love. We are alone, you and I, and we love well enough to defy and to ignore the world. We are alone I say, though the law calls us bound each of us to another. We are alone in our love as we can be content to be in our happiness. We belong to each other, and only Heaven itself shall part us. You think I am mad? You think I speak in the passion of the moment—no, what I say to you now I have thought over all through the hours since I started to find you, all through every plan that I have made for our lives—together.”

“*Together!*” The one word stirred her to the depths of her heart, and forced upon her the realisation of all it would mean to part from him now.

“Let me go—let me go, a moment,” she asked him; and Boyd releasing her, put her gently from him.

With a little staggering movement she reached a chair, and lay back in it, breathing quickly, while her eyes followed him in his sudden restless prow about the little room.

“I don’t know what you mean—what you are thinking of—I—you must give me time to think,” she said uneasily, yet all the time with the thought of how sweet it was to have him think for her.

“Give you time,” he said. “What for, Nell? To make up your mind against me afresh? To remember what you imagine to be your duty, perhaps? No, I shall give you no more time than it

SINLESS

will take me to see about procuring some sort of vehicle fit to drive us to Alnwick, and you to gather together your belongings here. What do you want time for? Isn't it sufficient for you to know that the past is dead—save for that one part of it that made you mine—that there is nothing but the present and the future, that I am going to fill with love and joy for you? Don't try to turn me from my purpose, Nell,—in every other thing, now and for ever I will obey you, but not in this. Don't try to send me from you," coming over to her side and taking her back into his arms, "for I won't be sent. Why play with words? Why speak as though we could ever part—now? Even if there were reason for the sacrifice of all your life that reason would be swept away. Later, you shall argue it all out with me at any length you like; but now you must be guided by me——"

"But you don't know all—you have not let me tell you."

"I know all I care to know now, all it seems to me that matters. Darling, I know that I have found you, that you are mine, that you are the one woman in all the world, and—" he held her closer, he looked long into the sweet, anxious eyes that fell at last beneath the passionate tenderness of his, "that you are the mother of my child!" The last words were whispered against her quivering lips, so low that they were scarcely a breath. But she heard them, and with a little stifled sob turned her face against his breast. In that moment he had complete command over her. Then he loosed her from his arms, and offered her no caress, as though to show her

SINLESS

that passion alone had not swayed him. "If I would let you," he said, "would you send me from you now?"

And the woman crept back to the shelter of his arms with a long sigh like the sigh of a tired child.

SINLESS

CHAPTER XXV

THERE was a very long silence in the little cottage room ; the snowy window curtains flapped gently in the soft breeze that brought on it the mingled scents of box and mignonette and stocks and all the wealth of old-fashioned flowers in the little fragrant garden beyond. In the great trees the birds held high revelry ; from afar off there came the sounds of children singing in the fields, mingled with the faint clatter of tea-cups that came from the little kitchen.

In a vague, half restless yet contented way, Boyd heard them all, while he held Nell closer, and tried vainly to silence the bitter weeping into which she had broken.

“Don’t cry so badly,” he implored. “Nell, you frighten me—you will make yourself ill—” and paused suddenly, his heart gripped by the thought that he had forgotten how unfit she was to bear the strain of such a scene as the one through which they had just passed. He had forgotten everything but that he had found her, that she was his beyond all earthly power to part ; he had forgotten that there was another living creature in all the world but her ; and, made reckless by the determination that never again should she escape him, made impatient by the love that he had held in check so long, but that now had gained its way at last, he would have listened to no word that might mean delay, he would have borne her then and there from this simple home

SINLESS

where she had hidden, to a home of his own making for her, to a place where fear and sorrow should never touch her life again, to a little kingdom of their own where love alone should reign.

But he remembered now, and with memory there came a strange pang, a chill uneasiness to his heart. He remembered what these months of loneliness and anxiety must have been to her, he remembered how she had been failing steadily in health, and he realised with a pang of remorse that to-day he had come upon her too abruptly.

Fear seized upon him—fear that drove the colour from his face, and robbed him momentarily of all his strength. His arms that had held her to him with force of which he was unconscious slackened their clasp a little ; with one hand held gently beneath her chin he lifted her face to his, gazing down upon it in new dread. The past months of silent suffering, of patient endurance, had left their mark upon it. There were pallor that was alarming, depressions in the soft cheeks that were surely unnatural, great purple shadows under the lovely eyes—they all told their own pitiful tale. And there was a listless droop of her whole body and a tired sound even in the great tearless sobs that shook her slight frame now, which seemed to drive the blood from the man's heart in a horrible dread of which he was powerless to rid himself.

“Forgive me—I ought not to have come here as I did—I ought to have sent you word—I ought not to have frightened you. Forgive me ! See, I won't say another word to worry you—I will do anything you tell me.”

SINLESS

He put her into a chair which he drew close to the window, and stood by her side, remorseful, miserable, with that new fear still tugging at his heart of which he dared not speak to her, but that he wished some word of hers might dispel. And she, divining his thought perhaps, stretched out one little hand to him.

“Will you really do what I tell you? Will you—go away——”

“No. Anything but that—I told you so just now. Don’t ask me. Nell—Nell—you came back to me—you——”

“I know,” she said softly. “I don’t mean for always—but for a little while—they—they—won’t understand here, and—and—I can’t—I dare not come away—now.”

“And I dare not leave you. What does it matter what they think here—what does it matter what anyone thinks, to us—we who from this hour give up our world?”

“That is what we have to talk over, you and I—when—when I am able to talk quietly to you—when,” with a faint smile, “we are both calmer. I can’t now, and I can’t in the haste of the moment let you or let myself decide upon the future. You must see that that is reasonable enough. Little more than an hour ago I thought never to see you again——”

“And if it had been so, what had you meant to do?”

“You asked me once if life had become too hard,” she returned, lifting her eyes gravely to his face, “and even when you asked the question, you

SINLESS

knew it was too hard. If—I had met you that next day as I promised—if I had listened to all you would have said to me, I should have been too weak to resist you; with the terror that was getting worse every day I should have grown reckless too. And beside that, it was brought before my eyes every hour almost, that you too were worse than merely unhappy. I should have let my heart plead for you where I should not have listened to its pleadings for myself. I knew that, and I was glad that chance took me away then, and that you never sought me. But life had grown too hard—too bitterly hard for endurance—and—yes, to you who alone can understand and pity me, I will tell all the truth—there was one moment when—I meant to end it——”

“Nell!”

“Is it so wonderful? It was no use to me and it was no use to any one. And then, all at once, I seemed to remember that though I might consider I had a right to end my own life, I had no right to end another—a life that belonged to you as well as to me. With that thought other thoughts came, that helped me to bear my life. I have never been strong, and lately it has seemed wonderful how I have held on to life at all; and always I have felt sure that it cannot last long——”

“For God’s sake cease! Nell, are you bent on driving me mad! How can you ever hope to get well again if you give way to such cruel, horrible thoughts! Do you want to end my life too? Do you? For I swear that without you I would not live another hour! There—I wanted to be gentle,

SINLESS

calm with you, and you have made me rough again,—I——” He ceased abruptly. Her words had been an echo of the thought that he would not even let his heart form; and they seemed but to open up the road to despair. And he turned sharply away, and leant his arms on the low mantelpiece, and his face upon them.

Nell followed him presently.

“Forgive me,” she pleaded in her turn; and Boyd snatched her back into his arms and held her there as though he never meant to let her go again.

“Say you didn’t mean it!” he demanded of her, “say *something* to drive out of my mind the horrible fear you put there. You have been killing yourself by inches—you want care and—and—skilled attention. Who would not perish in an out-of-the-way place like this. Say that is all—say that you will come away—now, this moment——”

She held her face up to his; but he saw by her eyes that everything had grown dim to her.

“I tried to think and act for myself,” she said dully, “and I was wrong all through—you shall think for me now.” Boyd came back to the present and the memory of all that had to be done before this day was over, with a long sigh.

Half-an-hour later he had come through a slightly awkward interview with Nurse White and her old sister, who, while they were unable to regard him with the eye of suspicion, were still a little alarmed at the prospect of losing their lodger so hastily. Also they gave him the information that there was no possibility of hiring any sort of conveyance, fit

SINLESS

for a lady, nearer than Alnwick ; and Nurse White herself strongly advised him to make his arrangements there to-day and return to her cottage on the morrow. This was common-sense after all. Instinctively he chafed against delay, instinctively he mistrusted it ; but he was obliged to own that for Nell's sake it would be wiser. And so, reluctantly, and with an uncomfortable touch of misgiving, a little later he left her.

But when her old sister was creeping about over the closing up of the doors, about nine that night, Nurse White came down the stairs a little hurriedly.

“Don't lock up,” she said. “You'll have to put on your bonnet and fetch Doctor Blake. She,” with an upward glance that meant to indicate Nell in her room, and a small “I told you so” sort of sniff, “won't leave the house to-morrow, no, nor yet for another month, if I knew anything !”

SINLESS

CHAPTER XXVI

IT was a soft August evening with just a touch of chill in the air which reminded one that autumn was close at hand. The sun setting in a golden ball threw a dazzlingly red beam right across Kenneth Forbes' eyes, as a little laboriously, and followed by Doctor Oswald, he climbed into a hansom in the yard of Waterloo Station.

He gave the Half Moon Street address, and then leant back with a smile, which found no answer in the doctor's grave, just now rather anxious eyes.

"So we're back again," he said contentedly, "after five months and a bit more of real holiday-making. I'm not so sure that you have found it unmixed joy, Oswald—I'm a bit suspicious of those one or two visits you contrived to pay to town, and the letters you've been so very jealous about, and those you've written in secret, oh, and all the rest of it."

"My dear Forbes," returned Oswald, with a touch of rare temper, "you have paid me well to take this trip, and I've given you my best advice—the rest is surely my own business!"

"Keep your hair on. Just tell him to go first to G—— Street." Oswald obeyed, and wondered a little. He wondered still more when Forbes went into a rather dingy building of second-rate offices, and came down with an envelope in his hand, five

SINLESS

minutes later, and a mingling of anger and amusement plainly showing on his dark face.

But Oswald was in a hurry to get home, and he left his patient unceremoniously at the corner of the street. It was more than a month since he had been able to learn anything of Nell; he felt certain that there must be some word for him at home, and he hastened thither with a strangely uneasy feeling creeping over him. He had heard of or from her only at rare intervals, and he had had no opportunity of telling her when Forbes was likely to return, because Forbes had chosen to pretend that he did not know himself.

On the doctor's table there were letters that had accumulated for nearly three weeks, and among them not one which bore Nell's writing. On the desk, where the very latest letters were put, there was a telegram, over the opening of which Oswald's fingers shook.

"Wiring on chance catching you. Come immediate. Urgent. Nurse White."

Oswald rung the bell.

"A Bradshaw," he said, "and no matter who wants me, they must wait. A cab in half-an-hour. What ill-luck made me select a spot at such a distance," he added to himself. He carefully avoided all chance of seeing Forbes, and made a bolt for King's Cross like a guilty school boy. He deliberately rolled himself up and went to sleep; and woke up in the very early morning hours feeling cramped and dusty. He swallowed a cup of coffee at the station, got the best trap and horse that he could secure, and worried through the drive from Alnwick

SINLESS

to the outskirts of Leathway till he nearly drove the unfortunate coachman silly.

"The Rest" presented a silent appearance which struck a chill fear to his heart; and Nurse White, herself opening the door, wore such a grave face that he stopped short in the little porch.

"Not the worst news?" he said quickly.

"No, sir—not the worst, but pretty close to it."

Oswald breathed again. "Where is she?" he asked.

"Had I better tell you, sir, all that has happened—upon my word——"

"Not a syllable till I've seen her." Nurse White led the way upstairs silently; and a minute later the doctor was looking down upon Nell, looking down upon a still, white face, closed eyes, set lips, a rough tangled mane of sunny hair, and holding in his fingers a little wrist that was almost pulseless.

The minutes passed and lengthened into an hour. Nurse White had been put through such a catechism as she had never been put through in her life. She had watched the doctor work as she had never seen him work before, and she had had to move with rapidity that she would have thought impossible to her, to carry out his varied and bewildering orders. But before the hour was quite gone she heard him laugh, that little short, satisfied laugh that she had learned to know well, and that always meant that he was pleased with himself; and she saw Nell's eyes open once, and heard her breath coming regularly.

Then he signed to her to follow him to the next room, and listened with rather a puzzled frown while

SINLESS

she gave him an account of all that had happened since, after the arrival of a stranger, Mrs Francis was about to make preparations for departure on the morrow — now five days ago.

“It’s the most curious thing——” she begun, with her slight sniff that Oswald knew well.

“My dear nurse,” he said, “everything’s curious if you only come to think of it. Always remember the woman’s advice to the dirty little boy—‘There’s many a thing in this world you’ve got to shut your eyes to—and soap’s one of them!’ Your patient’s life hangs on a thread—that is all that need concern you—or me.”

Under this snub Nurse White was silent.

“And—he?” inquired the doctor, who was anxious to meet the stranger.

“A lunatic—waiting to see you, and racing up and down my parlour till there won’t be a bit of carpet left!” rejoined the Nurse tartly.

“There’s always Tottenham Court Road,” smiled Oswald, and ran down the stairs quickly.

In the parlour he came face to face with Boyd—Boyd looking twenty years older than his age, with blanched face, and eyes from which sleep might have been forever banished.

“You may take that look off your face, sir,” he said, in that voice which never failed to inspire confidence. “I do not need to ask or you to tell me whom I am addressing. Names do not matter—your presence here is sufficient. I only wish I had met you sooner, that I might have pointed out to you which way your plain duty lay——”

SINLESS

"She is going to live?" Boyd breathed impatiently across his words.

"She is going to live. Oh, don't give me the praise. It was about the turning point, and I am glad to say I arrived then—I understand her, but if she had been left to someone who did not——" a slight shrug finished the sentence. Also he turned away considerably, because Boyd had gone to the other side of the room, and words were impossible to him. After a long pause Oswald went nearer to him.

"You may resent my words if you like," he said, "but I am proud to say I have been her friend as well as I could for a long while—what did you leave her to this for—what amends could you make after she was dead? You've the face of an honest, kindly man—if you meant to desert her, why are you here now?"

"You wrong me—you don't understand. If I were to explain to you you never would or could believe. But you're her friend—I believe that, just as I believe you have given her back to me from the very jaws of death, say what you will—and you may believe me, she is the most sacred, the most precious thing to me on earth——"

"You use almost the words she once said to me," said the doctor, bewildered, "I suppose I don't understand——"

A loud knock on the cottage door interrupted him, a faint protest in Miss White's cracked old voice reached both men's ears, and then the door was flung open, and Forbes, a little breathless, very husky in voice, very white in the face and angry

SINLESS

eyed, stumbled in, not looking an inch farther than Oswald's amazed face.

"You only beat me by an hour or so," he announced, nearly choking. "You infernal ass, to think you and she had hoodwinked me so long! I came on last night—but waited for breakfast—wouldn't hurry myself for the best woman on earth—much less the worst. Now I'll say what I've got to say to my wife—Mrs Francis! MRS FRANCIS! if you please!"

"You'll not move from this room, and I'll trouble you to lower your voice because the ceilings are thin," said Oswald, putting himself before the door.

"Damn you!" cried Forbes, "I've come to fetch my wife. Perhaps you think I know nothing—perhaps you think I hadn't brain enough to suspect her—perhaps you think I didn't know enough to have her watched, and to take my little journey by way of giving her her head for a bit. Perhaps you don't know that I've had everything reported, and that I mean to take damn good care to ruin you in your profession. Perhaps——" Forbes paused for want of breath; he was purple in the face; and Oswald prepared for a severe fit in which he thought it would not be a bad thing to let him die. And, in the pause, Boyd stepped forward, and from the room above there came to the three men's ears the long, clear, wailing cry of a child, the weak cry of a child not many hours old, a cry that seemed to say it had not many hours to live. Forbes broke into a sneering laugh, and he was evidently on the point of breaking into a fresh torrent of words. Then for the first time he saw Boyd, and he fell back

SINLESS

on to the window-seat as though he had been shot.

"You! Boyd!" he gasped. "What—what—the devil are you doing here!"

"If you will act upon my advice," said the doctor, turning to Boyd, while Forbes still stared blankly, "you will explain to Mr Forbes exactly why you are here. But take him out into the road, or the wood, or to Leathway or Alnwick—but I must have absolute silence in this house." He assisted Forbes, limp, but protesting, to the door; he watched him wildly gesticulating as he went down the garden path with Boyd behind him with a face of stone; and then Oswald shut the door and went upstairs again.

"So he'd been lying low all the time!" he said to himself.

Into a pretty, rather overcrowded drawing-room in a house which stood in a fashionable part of Wimbledon, the winter sun shone on to the heads of three women sitting rather closely together over their tea, and evidently enjoying a little exciting gossip. Mrs Gordon-Smith was the hostess, and it was her voice that fell now to a thrilling whisper.

"It's a terrible thing—though of course it might have been even more terrible—of course I know I can trust you all absolutely, or I wouldn't say a word, for I should be the last one to spread scandal about poor dear Helen Boyd of all people. You both heard something, of course."

Both heads nodded.

"Well, it's very hard on poor Helen, who really takes it bravely——"

SINLESS

“Then her husband really did—did—go off with someone else?” The vicar’s wife looked shocked.

“Yes; he pretended to be going to Scotland with some men; and all the time there was someone he’d been in love with—and you know the usual sort of thing. The woman really must have been a very bad lot from all I heard. Fortunately, poor dear Helen never really cared a bit about her husband—personally, I thought him a horror—they’d lived apart so many years you know—but it’s a bit of a snub to one’s pride to know that he’s living out of the world with a woman who is evidently a very dreadful character. I did not really hear the whole truth, for Helen is, for once, reticent even with me; but Mr Boyd’s supposed to have gone back to India; and whatever has happened does not affect her position in the least you see—he has not left her in any vulgar way, and of course she could get a divorce, I suppose, if she liked. But I don’t think she has an idea of it; and she’s got her mother you know, and she’s not of a sentimental turn of mind, and I really believe that she is happier than she has been since her precious husband came home, only to make all this trouble for her. But still it’s one’s pride, you see, and she’d feel it, naturally.”

“She’s such a nice little thing; but, I always thought, quite unsuited to her husband.”

“Quite. And you won’t breathe a word?”

“My *dear*!” said the Vicar’s wife, with reproach in her thin voice. “It is hardly a thing to be *spoken* of!”

“I suppose not. And as poor Helen so wisely says herself, least said soonest mended.”

SINLESS

At the same moment Forbes was sitting with his feet nearly in the fire, still in the little furnished house in town, and listening to Mrs Jessop's sympathies bellowed at him in all kinds of tones, with now and again a grunt for response.

"I say it again, Kenneth, you've behaved beautifully—beautifully—but quixotically. I shall never cease to be glad that I—I—met the shameless hussy just when I did, and that I was able to warn you. All the same, I think you're wrong—too easy—and you should have divorced her—you should have——"

"She'd have had the whip hand of me whatever I'd done," grunted Forbes, roused to speech by bitterly disappointing memory. "I'd the whole thing cut and dried—I spent no end of money on having her watched, and every little happening reported to me. I went a journey that cost no end, and that I didn't want to take, because—I discovered things that made me think I'd make her pay for her deceit, and pay dearly. I made all my plans; and I only wish I'd got back a bit sooner."

"But—" began Mrs Jessop, and Forbes kicked over the tongs viciously.

"I tell you I'd made my plans—if—if—the child had lived, Ellen would never have known another day's peace; but curse it! it must needs go and die! She's my wife, and in law it was my child! I tell you I took the very best advice—but it died—confound it—it died," regretfully, "and she could snap her fingers at me—she does."

"I'd make her name ring through London, anyway——"

"Would you? My name! Sense, that! Bah!

SINLESS

there's no peace when there's a woman round. Let 'em go hang, say I! But there's one thing I'm sorry for—" There was real regret in his voice, real sadness in his eyes, and Mrs Jessop thought that after all he might be feeling the blow dealt to him more keenly than he would admit.

She put a hand sympathetically on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I've had to quarrel with Oswald—a wonderful man; but it wasn't his physic so much as his manner that carried one along the right way with it. I'm going back—I can feel it—every day, without his care. If it wasn't that I know he wouldn't come, I'd swallow my pride and send for him. He didn't behave well to me about Ellen, but I expect the minx wheedled him into doing all he did. He's a clever man—and knew how to treat my case. I'm sorry I had to quarrel with him—there isn't anyone," dreamily, "who could mix whiskey and honey to suit my throat like Oswald could."

"But—but—about Ellen, Kenneth——"

"Oh, hang Ellen! I wish I could induce Oswald to give me the prescription for gout, and I wish Worth would learn how to mix the honey up!"

And the setting sun cast a red streak also across the rippling gold of Nell's hair and into the blue of her eyes, that now held something more than the lurking tear which always seemed to linger in them. She was standing on the deck of a huge steamer, that already was beginning to throb with life, and Owen Oswald was standing beside her.

"Perhaps," he said, and there was a touch of sad-

SINLESS

ness in his eyes and in his voice too, "we shall never meet again, since you are bidding good-bye to England for ever; but I hope that may not be so."

"And I too. You may, some day, come out to—us!" She paused over the last word, and blushed over it a little as well; and Oswald thought, that with that slight flush on her cheeks that were no longer wan and pale, with the soft new tone in her voice, and the tender, wondering half sadness of her eyes, he could hardly recognise the woman whom he had first met when she was lost in a dense London fog, and whom afterwards he had met in the little house in Half Moon Street, where she had seemed to shrink away from the very glance of his eyes, where she had seemed to live in fear of her own shadow. "Oh, Dr Oswald," she went on softly, looking dreamily out on to the restless little waves that lapped the ship's sides, "I wonder if I shall ever be able to look into my own heart without remorse, without the feeling that—oh, don't you see—don't you understand that to take one's happiness across the grave of another woman's sorrow must rob life of some of its sweetness—sometimes I think of all!"

"I can readily understand it—if it were so," he returned, the old tone of comfort and strength that his voice had ever held for her coming into it again. "But it is not—you may believe me. My dear, you are not rushing headlong into the life before you in the eager passion of the moment—without consideration, and without thought. You know your sacrifice, if sacrifice it be, and you know in taking your just heritage of freedom you lay yourself by a social law beneath a social ban. But you know

SINLESS

your own heart too, and your own truth. The world that could not, and would never care to understand, may turn its back upon you ; but I think the world is, and will ever be, very far from you ! ”

Nell sighed, and her eyes grew dim ; but she stretched out her gloved hand and rested it with the old touch of dumb gratitude upon his arm.

And then from below there came to them the violent ringing of a bell, the shouts of “ All ashore ” which went round the ship, laughter mingled with the sound of tears. And over all the starting of the great screw.

Boyd came hurrying up to them.

“ I had an awful tussle to find that lost bag,” he smiled, addressing Nell, “ but it’s all right now. They’re just going to hoist the gangway, Oswald——”

Oswald made a wry face. Then he said good-bye with rather suspicious haste, and lifted Nell’s hand for a moment to his lips.

“ Be very good to her,” he said aside, a little awkwardly to Boyd ; and the next moment he had sprung on to the gangway. Then the huge vessel shuddered and trembled and forged onward slowly, steadily.

“ You have no regret ? ” Boyd said to her softly, that night, when they sat alone, in the white light of the moon. “ You have neither regret nor fear, sweetheart ? ”

“ No—no ; it is not I—it is if ever you——”

He leant nearer to her and drew her head down on to his breast.

“ We have shaped our own lives, Nell—we have

SINLESS

given up the world, holding it well lost. You go to a world of our own now—and King over it all is Love. Tell me you have no regret.”

For answer she lifted her shy, sweet mouth to his. She could not trust herself to speak ; and even as his lips lingered on hers in kisses that stirred her soul to its depths, even as she heard the loud rapturous throbbing of the heart that beat alone for her, she wondered if, through all her life, she would be haunted by the thought that she had gained her happiness over the grave of another woman’s sorrow,

“ Let us alone: What is it that will last ?
All things are taken from us and become
Portions and parcels of the dreadful Past;
All things have rest and ripen towards the grave
In silence ; ripen, fall, and cease.
Give us long rest or death ; dark death or dreamful ease.”

THE END

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